



西湖游记

Journey to the West Lake

Paul Cox

National Novel Writing Month 2004



西湖游记

Journey to the West Lake

The Long Life of Rabbit, Book One

By Paul Cox



Illustration from Er-Ya (500-300 B.C.E.)



National Novel Writing Month 2004
<http://www.nanowrimo.org>

*This document is available online at
[http://www.archive.org/details/
PaulCox-JourneyToTheWestLake](http://www.archive.org/details/PaulCox-JourneyToTheWestLake)*



*This work is hereby released into the Public Domain.
To view a copy of the public domain dedication, visit
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/publicdomain/>
Or send a letter to:
Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way
Stanford, California 94305, USA.*

Chapter One

A cricket champion is born; Splinter-of-Jade vanquishes all.

Many hundreds of years ago, during the ancient dynasty known as the Southern Song, a cricket hatched under a rock at Tiger-Pawing Spring and began to sing. Legend related that in ancient times this spring, in the hills to the south of the West Lake, had been dug out of the ground by a pair of celestial tigers; perhaps some of their power and *qi* had been left behind in the waters. This was often said to be the reason for this cricket's rise to greatness, though such a simple explanation paid little heed to the importance of good heredity. The fact was that this insect possessed--through both lineage and celestial energy--a thick torso, a long tail, silvery wings, and a bright bluish-green spot on his neck like a fleck of jade. All of these features were considered marks of a superior fighting cricket. It was a veritable certainty that he wouldn't be left singing out in the hills for long.

Cricket fighting was all the rage during the Southern Song Dynasty, nowhere more so than in the splendid city of Hangzhou, the imperial capital near the mouth of the Qiantang River. The walled city spread out alongside the eastern shore of the West Lake, with the grand lake palace of the Song Emperor perching on the waterline. As everyone knew very well in those days, the Emperor loved to fight crickets. Every summer cricket trainers would scour the mountains around the lake, listening for the slightest hint of a chirp. The most promising specimens they collected would be put on a diet of the finest crab meat and chestnuts--and sometimes even ant eggs if the trainer was especially confident--and taught how to fight. Each year, the most fortunate trainers would bring the champion crickets of the whole city before the Emperor, who would pick out the most spirited, beautiful and mighty insect of all to be his personal fighter. The trainer who provided this Imperial paragon of crickethood would be rewarded spectacularly.

It was during this summer hunting frenzy that the hearty cricket with the jade neck found himself thrust into the world of fighters. He was chirping away lustily on a rock beside Tiger-Pawing Spring one morning just after sunrise, pondering the short life ahead of him and the days of singing that were in store. Singing, eating, hopefully mating--he figured he could handle it. He was only trying to make up his tiny mind whether to stay on this same rock for the rest of his life, or to try out the slightly higher one he could see on the other side of the spring. He had just about given up the idea of changing locations when a huge, ugly cricket trainer, called Crazy General by his friends and competitors, shuffled out of the trees behind him and forced the issue. The cricket cut short his song in mid-chirp, leaped, sailed across the narrow spring to the opposite rock, and tried to crawl underneath it. He was surprised to find that this rock, unlike his old one, was firmly attached to the mud beneath and offered not a single hole in which to hide. He obviously had a lot to learn about geology, among other things, in the short span of life he had left.

Crazy General could tell he was onto something. He had been in the business for so long, he could tell a champion cricket just by its chirp. What he heard at Tiger-Pawing Spring was definitely a winning chirp. The trainer spotted the source of the sound as the insect broke off his noise-making and flew to the far side of the spring in panic. "Aha!" Crazy General shouted at his foolish quarry, and charged right through the water. He didn't even have to do any digging to catch the splendid cricket; his prize just backed up against the rock and let the net have him. The trainer stuck him in the small cage he carried on a pole and examined him with an expert eye.

"Not bad at all!" he told his captive, thrilled. "When I'm done with you you'll make a fighter fit for the Emperor himself, and beat the antennae off every bug in the Empire too, or my name isn't Crazy! You know what the most important mark of a great cricket is?" The round, black eyes stared back at him blankly. "It's the blue-green color on the neck. All the best fighters have it. But *your* neck isn't just blue-green, it's the color of jade! I shall name

you Splinter-of-Jade, and every trainer in the city shall know this name!"

The hunter started back down through the woods in triumph, net and cage-pole over his shoulder, wet sandals squishing flatulently. The captive cricket didn't make a sound.

* * * * *

Splinter-of-Jade spent the next two months suffering through extensive training in Crazy General's "studio", a shabby wooden room over a wine shop near City-God Hill. Every night he would sing to the moon that was just visible beyond the cage, the window and the city walls. When Crazy General came upstairs, the trainer would usually throw something at his cage to shut him up. During the day he only chirped while fighting, but that was a different sort of chirp: a battle-chirp. The training in the ring--a circular porcelain pot with a flat floor and high sides--started with a brush made from a few strands of camel-hair, which Splinter-of-Jade would attack ferociously with all the strength in his jaws. Once his reflexes were well-honed, sluggish, harmless mole crickets were introduced to the arena; he ripped into them with equal enthusiasm. From the beginning, Crazy General spent much of his savings to put him on a special fighter's diet of crab meat and ground chestnuts. He gained weight and muscle rapidly. He was soon more than ready to take on the city fighting circuit.

In his first bout, Splinter-of-Jade took on Phoenix, the long-tailed reigning champion of City-God Hill. The prospect of an unknown challenger going up against a neighborhood hero brought a huge crowd to the wine shop; Splinter-of-Jade's handy victory earned Crazy General a nice pile of coins and strings. After that night the duels came fast and thick. The jade-necked newcomer took out Long-Legs of the South Gate with ruthless precision, nearly maimed Nine-Tails of the Lake for life, and tossed Fish Eagle of Solitary Hill right out of the ring. By the time of the Dragon Boat Festival, the day the Song Emperor habitually

selected the mightiest cricket for his own palace, Crazy General and his friends were certain he was sitting on a gold mine.

The evening of the festival, after the dragon boats had finished their traditional race around the shore of the West Lake, the year's crop of champion crickets were brought into the Emperor's court. Crazy General was so sure of the fortune waiting in his near future that he had borrowed money to buy a classy blue jacket that he could never afford through his ordinary means. Most of the other hopefuls looked like true long shots in comparison. But there was also a surprise in store: one of the entrants was a con-man from the provinces, whose cricket had two thoroughly illegal secrets and one perfectly acceptable, albeit very sneaky, one. Nobody had ever seen this cricket fight, and they all assumed that the trainer was a truly desperate case to dare show up here. Thus they didn't notice that the cricket was actually a female; the trainer merely rubbed a metal pin on the bottom of his porcelain pot to produce a false chirping noise. They also didn't know he had been feeding her ant eggs. Banned in fighting circles, ant eggs made crickets tireless and ferocious, but were said to eventually drive them crazy and make them bite off their own limbs. This cricket's third secret was her name, Graceful Blackbird; the mysterious outsider had chosen this after bribing a palace cleaner and learning that the Emperor was very fond of blackbirds, a whole flock of which he kept in the palace courtyards.

The Emperor himself finally showed up exactly thirty minutes late, as was proper with all Imperial appointments. He rubbed his hands in anticipation and surveyed the offerings. He instantly pointed to Splinter-of-Jade upon seeing him, but continued down the line just to be sure. His curiosity was struck by the odd little cricket at the very end of the line, the one belonging to the con-man. Was this a joke? He arched the Imperial eyebrows at the provincial trainer.

"And what manner of insect is this?" he queried. "We have never seen a cricket of such demeanor in court before."

"His name is Graceful Blackbird," the blackguard announced grandly, "and he is a

champion among champions, with a most unique fighting technique."

The Emperor wasn't entirely convinced, but his eyes lit up at the name. "It is indeed the case," he conceded, "that a powerful Immortal will often appear in the guise of an old beggar. One never can trust the eyes alone. Only a fight will reveal the truth of this supposed fighting technique."

All those present crowded around the table as Crazy General brought forth his champion for the final test. The pretender rubbed the metal pin on the bottom of the ring furiously to mimic a challenging chirp, and Splinter-of-Jade let sound his own battle cry. He climbed into his little stone carrying-cage and was lifted into the ring. Crazy General opened the gate and he burst out, jaws gaping. But something wasn't right--the other cricket in the ring was a female! He had never encountered this situation before. He froze in the middle of the ring, mandibles opening and closing, trying to remember the correct operating procedure. The crowd gasped and leaned in, unmindful of the Emperor's personal space. Crazy General screamed. The ant-egg-crazed Graceful Blackbird attacked like a mad dog. Crazy General stabbed frantically with his camel-hair brush to separate the two combatants, just barely saving Splinter-of-Jade his head.

There was only one possible decision: Graceful Blackbird of the Mesmerizing Attack was named Imperial Cricket Champion, the con-man left town a rich man, and Crazy General walked out of the palace in disgrace. That night, however, as he was trying to drink away his shame, he was made an offer. Starry Jing, the one and only head of the Imperial kitchens, visited the wine shop below City God Hill. Crazy General didn't recognize the chef, but he did recognize the strings of coins the man threw down on the table.

"I want Splinter-of-Jade," said the man.

"Take him," said Crazy General, "He's a failure. You're offering me far too high a price for him--you must not have seen what happened at the palace today."

"I know what I saw," he answered. "That outsider cheated, and I can't let that ruin the career of the greatest fighting cricket I've ever

laid eyes on. I'm going to make him into the King of Crickets."

The chef took the pot and exited the wine shop, leaving ten strings of cash on the table.

Now Starry Jing not only had an uncommon love of cricket fighting, he also had knowledge and resources at his disposal that nobody else could match. To rise to his present position he had been required to study all of the classics of food, cooking and health, including the treatises of the ancient alchemists and Immortals. From these he learned the secrets of longevity, power and *qi*; he was expected to use this to ensure the long-lasting health of the Emperor. To aid in this task, the Imperial pantry was stocked with a whole pharmacopoeia of the most powerful elixirs under heaven. With these, the Kitchen Head turned the full force of his powers on his cricket.

Splinter-of-Jade's diet of crab meat and chestnuts--now the choicest morsels of each in the Empire--was thus further fortified with reverted cinnabar, elixir of ginseng, ground pearls, rare herbs collected off sacred mountains by adepts of the Dao, and immortality potions refined at the Temple of Heaven. Starry Jing administered these painstakingly, according to the phases of the moon and the prevailing winds, as indicated in the ancient classics. He secretly hid the cricket's cage right in the center of the palace, where the pre-eminent *feng shui* of the entire world concentrated the power of the earth element and the Pole Star. Splinter-of-Jade was filled with arcane power the likes of which no other cricket had ever experienced. Ant eggs were nothing next to the Dao. The Imperial Chef tested the cricket against spiders, then giant scorpions and mice. Splinter-of-Jade not only emerged victorious each time, he destroyed his opponents completely.

One unlucky day--perhaps it was the ninth day of the ninth month, or some other such inauspicious date--Starry Jing was furtively carrying his experiment back to the kitchens for feeding when he ran straight into the Imperial Person and his attendants in the courtyard. The Emperor couldn't help but notice a porcelain cricket pot in his palace, and the chef had nowhere to hide.

"We didn't know the Head of the Imperial Kitchens was keeping a cricket," the August Personage crooned, his face lighting up under his requisite enormous hat. "We are always looking for worthy opponents for the Champion of All Under Heaven. How about a match?"

Starry Jing was trapped. "I beg the Imperial pardon, but this is no insect fit to take on the Champion. It's just a common cricket my youngest son found in the garden this morning. I have taken it as my ward purely out of compassion, for it has a broken leg and is quite under-nourished. It would never be able to withstand the Imperial Mesmerizing Attack even for a second."

The cook attempted to bow hurriedly, but he was so nervous his hands were shaking. He dropped the porcelain pot and it smashed on the palace flag stones, sending Splinter-of-Jade spinning into the grass. A great brute of a blackbird was perched nearby and saw the insect; it swooped in on its prey before anyone could react. At the last instant, Splinter-of-Jade went straight for the eyes. The hapless bird fled the courtyard, screeching for its life, leaving a few black feathers behind. One Imperial eyebrow was lifted towards Starry Jing.

"We trust this evening, after our sunset ceremony at the temple, would be a suitable time for a match? We do believe your ward has made an excellent recovery."

Starry Jing knew he was sunk. He starved his fighter for the rest of the day and tried to tire him out with swims in the goldfish pond, but the cinnabar had already done its miraculous alchemical work. Splinter-of-Jade merely punted half the goldfish out of the pond to show his disapproval. When night inevitably followed day, the chef brought the return challenger to the palace. Amid great ceremony he placed his stone carrying-cage in the gilded Imperial ring and lifted the door. Splinter-of-Jade had been waiting for this moment to reclaim the crown for too long; he shot out into the ring with supernatural force and hit his nemesis like a comet. Graceful Blackbird exploded, showering the Emperor and his head chef with detached limbs and translucent innards. The August Personage screamed.

Chapter Two

The Student, Rabbit, takes up the mathematical challenge; the search for a number begins.

Rabbit pedaled unhurriedly up the main avenue of Zhejiang University, Yuquan Campus, winding her way towards the Chairman. Mao Zedong shone in the rising sun as he greeted it with a smile and a magnanimous wave. Rabbit wished she could feel half that happy to see the morning arrive. It was just getting into the end of October, but the early mornings were already a little cold. Despite that, almost none of the students swarming up and down both sides of the main thoroughfare on foot and bicycle had changed out of their summer dress yet, so the cold added an extra dose of sluggishness to the traffic. Rabbit reached the steepest uphill stretch of the avenue and the crowd slowed down so much she had to dismount her bike to stay upright. Her classmate Lily, another third-year architecture student, ran up beside her.

"Slow down, what's the big rush?" Lily panted. "Math class first thing in the morning is nothing to get all worked up about."

Rabbit snorted. "If I was moving any slower I'd be sliding downhill! It's not humanly possible."

"You've got a lot to learn," her friend said, and shifted into a slow, viscous dance. She had started taking *tai ji* class as an elective, and didn't mind showing off. She immediately fell so far behind Rabbit that she had to run to catch up again. "See? Slower than bamboo growing, and it gets the *qi* flowing too."

"Great, you can race my grandmother. She moves enough *qi* to power a windmill by the time the sun comes up. She must keep it in jars or something."

Lily stretched her neck to both sides. "Don't knock it. I hear Professor Xian does it for five hours before every class."

"Professor Xian does an awful lot of *something*," Rabbit answered, lifting her bicycle onto the curb. "I'm thinking massive ginseng overdose."

The professor in question, Professor Xian of

the Mathematics Department, had completely white hair and a fondness for the ancient classics. He lived a secret, but not-so-well-concealed, fantasy of being the sort of great Imperial Examination scholar that was several centuries out of fashion. He was already waiting impatiently at the front of the cramped lecture room, counting on his fingers and moving his lips silently, when Rabbit walked in and found a seat on the edge. A few other students showed up to fill the remaining empty seats soon after, and he began.

"Happy Double Nines!" he shouted, silencing the room. Rabbit couldn't handle that smile first thing in the morning. What was the old man up to? Double Nines was supposed to be the worst day of the year. Was this some bad attempt at a test?

"I know what you're thinking," the Professor continued. "Nine-Nine is bad luck! All *yin*, no *yang*! It's when we all climb up to the top of Bao Chu Hill and drink smelly chrysanthemum tea for good luck!" He did a mocking little dance in front of the class. "If you're a real scholar of mathematics, though, the ninth day of the ninth lunar month has a different meaning. There's no good and bad in math, or darkness and light for that matter. Double Nines is simply *interesting*. All the Classics of Mathematics, dating right back to the Zhou Dynasty, claim that it's the best day of the year for probing the mysteries of the numerical universe. People didn't always go up on the mountains to fill their bodies with sunlight and *yang* energy; some did it to measure the stars." Merciful seasons, he wasn't even stopping to take a breath! "Why is there so much numerological power vested in this date? Just watch!"

Professor Xian turned to the blackboard and drew two three-by-three grids of dots, side by side, smacking the surface with the chalk each time to produce a satisfying tap. Underneath he wrote the characters, 'Double Compasses.'

"Double compasses!" he announced, and sped up his pace. "A compass, with its nine points east-southeast-south-southwest-west-northwest-north-northeast-center, is the mathematician's best friend. It can give meaning to any number between one and nine. We're talking ancient texts here, so we count from the top right slash northeast down, in the way one reads an ancient manuscript:

northeasteastssoutheastnorthcenternorthwestwestsouthwest. Every direction, of course, corresponds to an element, color, animal, constellation, flavor, internal organ, and so on; as you can see, the possibilities are endless. Give me the number of warts on your finger and I can tell you the color of the First Emperor of Qin's horse's eyes. Now, where it gets *really* interesting is today. Here we have two compasses, what some ancient texts call the Two Diamond Eyes of the Monkey King." He paused to draw a set of furry eyebrows over the two squares. "I'm not sure what that name means, but that's what they say. At any rate, with double grids, we can interpret numbers anywhere from one to *eighteen*. The possibilities are exponential. But the adept mathematician can only perform such calculations on the proper day, while the masses are off in the hills drinking flower tea."

Rabbit didn't exactly get what he was on about, but this sort of thing was fairly standard for Professor Xian. He now turned to the class for help.

"Tell me, what makes this particular Double Nines special?"

"There's an American election coming up?" someone offered.

"Big ping-pong match tonight?"

"Fifty-fifth year of the People's Republic?"

"I have a girlfriend?"

"Master Kong is more dead than ever?"

"It's the Year of the Monkey?"

The Professor held up his piece of chalk to request silence. "I heard it's the Year of the Monkey. That's an excellent starting point." He returned to the board and drew a tiny monkey head under the bottom center dot of the right grid. "Monkeys are creatures of the South. Associated with the color red and the fire element. Fine. What else is special today?"

"The wind is from the Northeast?"

"It's really, really nice and sunny outside?"

"Traffic is bad?"

"I've got some new shoes?"

"New shoes?!" the Professor cut in. "What brand?"

"I guess...Converse?" the surprised student at the back of the room answered.

"Are you sure about that?"

There was a scraping of desks as the student

checked their footwear.

"No, wait," the voice echoed from under the desk, "they say *Conviviality*! I think I got ripped off."

"Aha. Conviviality's are manufactured up in Beijing, if I'm not entirely mistaken. A relative of the Director of our University owns the factory. That must count for something!" The Professor returned to the board once again and pondered on the second grid for a moment. With a little hop, he leaned in and drew a miniature shoe above the dot representing North.

"Beijing is that way. Now we have the Secret Identities of the Double Nines: two compass directions, which also represent the numbers..." he ran his finger down the columns of dots from right to left. "Six and thirteen. Herein lies the clue to a thing, place or person, and the key to unlocking the whole mystery. Any guesses on these two numbers?"

There were no ready answers from the class. Six and thirteen were about the least numerologically significant numbers one could come up with. Where was the symbolism there? Everything came in threes and fives and eights and nines and sixty-fours.

"Wait," Lily said out loud, "I went to Six Harmonies Pagoda down on the river last month with my family. I think it has thirteen levels." She fished around in her bag and pulled a postcard out of a notebook.

"Incredible!" Professor Xian exclaimed, snatching the postcard from her and scrutinizing it. "I can't believe the progress we're making, and it's only early morning yet. Last year I spent most of Double Nines counting the leaves on a ginkgo tree, and ended up with the number thirty three thousand, three hundred and thirty-four, with only ten minutes before midnight to make sense of it! But this year we know just where the Number of Power lies." He held up the picture of the pagoda. "Six harmonies, thirteen roofs. Built on Yuelun Hill south of the West Lake in 970 AD--Northern Song Dynasty--by the Great King Qian Liu of Wuyue State, to tame the Qiantang River's tidal bore. The Six Harmonies are harmony in Heaven, Earth, the East, South, West and North. Six equals South on our chart, and the tower is indeed located just to the south of the

city. It also matches this position by being painted the color red. It's suitable for North as well, and thus the number thirteen, because it was built to control the water element. It appears to have thirteen levels because of the roofs, but in fact that's an illusion. On the inside there are only seven floors." He counted off seven dots on the first grid and circled the northwest point, considering its significance for a moment. "Northwest is halfway between Black, the north, and white, the West. Gray, the color of mist and fog. That can't be the solution; it must indicate that this path leads to confusion and shrouds the true number. How else do we get from six harmonies to thirteen levels? Anyone?"

"Try taking the stairs," someone suggested, more out of annoyance than anything else.

"Stairs!" the Professor shouted, throwing the postcard and piece of chalk across the room. "The path to Heaven. Carved from the element Wood. The secret to ultimate mathematical enlightenment must lie in those stairs! I simply must know how many there are!"

"I'll go count them for you," Rabbit offered, raising her hand. She had been sneaking a few glances out the window in the last few minutes, and couldn't help but notice how nice of a day it was turning into outside. It suddenly felt like a crime to be in this room listening to this nonsense on such a morning. She wasn't ordinarily the type to skip class and go sightseeing, but that was only because she couldn't usually get away with it.

Rabbit couldn't believe the senile old fool let her pull off such a coup. The other students beat themselves over the head for not volunteering first. Professor Xian promised to act as her official patron and defend her against all charges of absenteeism from her other professors until her return; the vital number came before all else. He stopped just short of giving her an actual traveling stipend. She left Lily and the other students behind with a solemn wave, abandoning them to their fate, and got out of the building as fast as she could. She paused out on the sidewalk to blink in the morning sun and unlock her bicycle. The roads on campus were now almost empty, with everyone in class. She started to ride back in the direction of Chairman Mao, her spirits instantly

ten kilos lighter. It crept into her mind that there was nothing stopping her from making up a number for Professor Xian right now, and spending the next few hours however she wished.

A group of foreign students were sprawled out on the grass in front of the statue; a woman with odd, colorful clothing signaled at Rabbit to come over. Rabbit rode up, curious. The students were all filling out paper forms in English and passing around foreign chocolate with a disturbingly pink filling.

"We are Americans," the student said in very, very bad Mandarin. She followed this up with something Rabbit couldn't understand at all, except for the word "vote". Ah, that's right, she remembered, the American presidential election was coming up.

"I can mail this to America very fast, how?" the strangely-dressed foreigner asked. Rabbit pointed vaguely in the approximate direction of the nearest post office.

"Over there. Say to the lady, 'I want EMS.' Fast, but very expensive."

"EMS," the student echoed. "Thank you."

"No problem. See you later, foreign devils!" Rabbit waved and rode off.

"See you later!" repeated the oblivious students.

What a strange ritual, she thought. As if writing some celebrity's name on a piece of paper every four years would make your life any more prosperous. How was sticking a form in the mail really any different than burning incense to Heaven? The scientists would probably call it a 'ritualized petition to the seat of power,' or something like that. The futility of it all made Rabbit view her own task for the morning in a different light, despite herself. Professor Xian was certifiably crazy, she thought, but at least his superstition wasn't playing into anyone's hands. Deep down, he probably didn't believe too strongly in the power of all that numerology—at least not in the way those Americans believed in their precious magic democracy. There was a big difference between healthy superstition for its own sake, and being taken for a ride. Her field trip to the Six Harmonies Pagoda was just a game between Professor Xian, Rabbit, and the fabric of the universe. It suddenly seemed so much more

sensible next to the earnest play-acting of those foreigners.

Just starting to get into the spirit of her undertaking, Rabbit locked her bicycle back up at the main gate of the campus and headed out into the morning traffic on Zhe Da Road to find a bus. She wasn't so taken up by enthusiasm, however, that she could miss a tell-tale twinge of hunger. Superstition could wait for breakfast. She picked her way across the intersection to find something to eat on the other side of the street. She happened to know that there was a little shop over there with a steamer full of miniature pork *baozi*. Fishing around in her pocket, Rabbit found two *yuan* coins and passed them on to the old lady in the shop. She proceeded to scarf down the four hot *baozi* right there in the street. The instant she bit into the last bun, however, she realized with a start her terrible miscalculation: those two *yuan* would have been just right for her bus fare. She threw away the greasy plastic bag and dug into her pockets a second time. No more coins except for a lone *jiao*; she'd need nineteen more of those to make fare, and the driver would have killed her for trying to pay with a stack like that. She tried her billfold, but as she expected there was nothing inside but her meal card; since she had only imagined sitting in class today, the plan had been to pick up her next stipend in the evening. She'd loaned her last twenty *yuan* to Lily yesterday for a haircut, and forgotten all about it. Rabbit cursed those four steaming *baozi* and the poor pig that had gone into them. Now, thanks to their tempting juiciness, she was left with naught but a single *jiao* to get her to the other side of town. This is what you get for not counting carefully on Double Nines, she told herself.

Chapter Three

The Seeker of Numbers sets out on the long road; a fallen champion escapes from the sixth floor.

The lock on Rabbit's second-hand, dark blue Forever brand bicycle clicked open once again. She mounted the seat and sighed. Surely there were more sensible ways of proceeding, but if foresight was her strong suit she wouldn't have been in this fix to begin with. There was no sense in starting to think things through this late in the game. She pushed off into a tight circle and coasted out under the arch of the campus gate again. At least it was still a beautiful day to be out of class. She smiled, reminding herself what a legendary feat of class-skipping she was getting away with here, as she navigated through the streams of opposing traffic--motorized, pedaled and pedestrian--and set a course to the east. A loop around the far side of Bao Chu Hill seemed to be a good start; after that she would reach the lake and could follow the shoreline south. Rabbit added a map of the city to her growing mental list of things that she would have done well to consider before leaving the campus. She was definitely no expert on how to get around in the city of Hangzhou, having only come here from the outlying mountain town of Suichang two years ago when she joined the University. Old Suichang had a much more reasonable number of streets, to be sure.

A very short distance later, Rabbit left the traffic of Zhe Da Road for the wide, less-traveled Qiushi Road. The newly-paved street was flat and smooth, and as usual, almost empty of traffic. Rabbit sped up, her bike squeaking and the chilly, misty (or was it smoggy?) morning wind blowing past her ears and short hair. On the corner, in front of the looming edifice of Dragon Stadium, stood the feet of the lofty Green Garden Towers. The five brand new, green-tinted glass towers were famous for containing the most expensive residential apartments in the city. They had been completed for a few years, but like Qiushi Road,

they were almost empty. The few occupied flats, marked by curtains, were mostly rented by a handful of top administrators and wealthy professors at Yuquan Campus. Rabbit took her eyes off the road to follow the lines of the buildings' ultra-modern architecture up towards the hazy sky, just in time to see a wide green window one-third of the way up the nearest tower shatter into a spider's web. Her front tire bumped into the curb; she braked and planted a foot on the pavement, her attention held upwards. The window was hit again from the inside and smashed, folding outwards in a single sheet. A huge old man in his underwear flew head-over-heels out of the hole and was hurled, yelling, all the way into the bike lane ten feet behind Rabbit. She prepared to push off and ride as fast as she could, heart racing, but before she could look away the man lifted a mangled hand in her direction, returned her stare, and bellowed, "Don't let him get away!" Then his head fell and he collapsed flat on the smooth pavement. Rabbit scrambled off her bike and ran towards the gates at his command.

The uniformed watchman at the gate was running past Rabbit in the other direction, so she entered the Green Garden Towers compound unchallenged. She ran in the building with the broken window and stabbed at the elevator button. She hopped from one foot to the other, and wondered what she was going to do when she found the murderer to prevent him from "getting away". She would have felt a lot better about the whole thing with something heavy in her hands for protection, but the only object in the bare marble-floored entrance room was a vase taller than Rabbit. The elevator was, of course, at the top floor, and watching the numbers light up at a turtle's pace was torture. It struck her that the murderer would probably take the stairs anyway, so she gave up on the lift and ran around the corner to the stairwell. It was silent. Rabbit started racing up, filling the shaft with echoes. After the first two flights she lost her breath and was forced to slow down. Which floor was the dead guy's window on? Fifth or sixth, or maybe seventh, she recalled. When she reached the first candidate she struggled to lower the significant sound of her heavy breathing and peeked through the crack of the door. She couldn't see

a thing. Before she could decide whether or not to open the door, she heard a crash from just above her. She hammered her way up another flight of stairs and leaned into the hallway through an identical door. The view was of a white vase--more of the handy weapon size--full of white flowers on a tiny white table, at the end of a stately hall carpeted and painted in red. The last apartment door on the left, next to the flowers, was lying on the floor in splinters. A couple of bugs of some kind were hopping down the carpet, making their way down the length of the hall towards Rabbit. Crickets! About six of the insects sprang through the inch of door space at Rabbit's feet one by one, chirping rapidly, and disappeared into the stairwell behind her.

Rabbit focused her will on the white flower vase. If she could reach that blunt weapon, she could figure out the rest from there. She slid through the door with her hand clamped over her mouth and crept up the suddenly very long hallway. When the smashed-open doorway drew level, she jumped over the shattered wood and snatched at the vase with one ungainly motion. The move was an utter failure. Table, vase, flowers and Rabbit fell to the floor with two thumps and a crash. She grabbed the little table instead and leapt to her feet.

"Back for more?!" roared a voice from the apartment. Rabbit held her breath. Really, she thought, the dead guy had only told her to make sure his murderer didn't get away. He never said she had to go inside his apartment, and this was the only way out. As far as she could tell, the killer was already trapped. Through the broken doorway, she could see straight through the shattered window on the other side of the swanky living room to the skyline beyond. One last straggling cricket hopped across the clean grey carpet.

"Oh, pardon me. I mean, chirp chirp," the cricket added in a booming voice. Rabbit backed up against the wall and hurled the little table with all her strength. The cricket hopped, met the missile in mid-air, and broke it clean in half. The two pieces clattered to the floor.

"No, no, quit that! *I'm* not killing wantonly here. Only the one man, and he was a real bastard."

Rabbit shrugged. "He told me not to let you get away. Ordered me with his dying breath,

actually."

The insect chirped in laughter. "He *would* do that. The only reason he didn't want me escaping is because I'm worth bags and bags of money. That's all he ever cared about, right up to his last words. Him and every other trainer I've met in the last, oh, century or so."

"Greed is not so uncommon as you seem to think," Rabbit pointed out, regaining her voice. "If that's all it takes to earn a beating like that, you've got a lot of work to do."

"Oh, don't get me wrong," the murderer replied, hopping up on the top of a vertical splinter of wood right in front of Rabbit. "He wasn't just greedy. He was also terribly inhumane towards his crickets. Do you see what floor we're on here?"

Rabbit tried to remember, but couldn't. "Five or six?"

"The sixth floor! Every cricket trainer since Master Kong has known that you can't keep anybug above ground level. Our connection with the Earth element is too vital. I can handle a little altitude, of course, but those other bugs were falling to pieces up here. Besides that..." He leaned a minute span closer and lowered his voice. "The old bastard wanted to feed them *ant eggs*. I simply couldn't stand for it."

Rabbit decided agreement was the best policy. "I guess so. Who was he, exactly? Are you going to be in serious trouble for finishing him off?" She could imagine all sorts of dangerous and complicated scenarios involving the Russian Mafia or the Party.

"Just some kind of merchant. He was in charge of the dining halls at the University, or something like that. He wasn't really a cook, though. Don't ask me, jobs are so complicated these years. As for trouble..." He chirped in amusement. "Crickets don't get in trouble! Unless there's a bird around. But let's not talk about birds."

Rabbit looked up the length of the empty hallway, suddenly nervous again. "Well, strange young women hanging around outside murder scenes *can* get in an awful lot of trouble. Maybe I should get going, since I'm not quite as dedicated to my task of 'not letting you get away' as I was when I got here. Those were kind of confusing instructions anyway, seeing as the guy was talking about a magic cricket."

"Fine, nobody is stopping you. You'll never get

out the way you came in without being noticed, though."

Rabbit hadn't considered that. "And so?" she asked, unable to imagine an appealing answer.

"This way," the insect replied, and hopped to the door opposite the dead man's. He wriggled through the gap under the door; a second later she heard a click and it swung open. As expected, the apartment was empty and unoccupied like most of those in the Green Garden Towers. She walked in and shut it behind her.

"So who are you, anyway?" the cricket asked. "Just an innocent passer-by?"

"Of course. You just about flattened me out there in the bike lane. I'm just a student at Zhe Da. You can call me Rabbit." She started to hold out a hand, then gave up on that idea, paused, and gave a little bow instead.

"Good morning. I'm just Splinter-of-Jade, the fighting cricket champion of the Southern Song Dynasty. And of the Liao, Jin, Ming and Qing. I took a break in the Yuan for personal reasons." Rabbit thought she could see him lay his antennae flat on the floor, what she assumed to be the cricket equivalent of a bow. "Now that we've established that, let's get moving." He sprang like an arrow from a bow at the floor-to-ceiling window of the vacant apartment. It shattered and folded outwards as the last one had. He chirped in victory. "Ah ha! Got that one on the first try. Now, come on over."

Rabbit calmly walked to the open window and let the wind blow through her hair. The view was out the back of the building now, of the Dragon Stadium blocking out the horizon. These were clearly the cheaper flats. She kicked at the dangling sheet of smashed glass.

"And how were you planning on this working out?" she asked. "Do you have a superhuman dragonfly friend who's going to pick me up and fly me down, or something?"

"Oh," said Splinter-of-Jade behind her with genuine surprise, "you don't even know? Strange." A tiny mass struck her in the middle of her back with the force of a bullet, and she was launched out the window with a squeal.

Rabbit cursed the cricket with every word she could think of on the short trip to solid ground, which only added up to about two and a half words.

"Yooou little sh--!"

A decorative flower patch ended her outburst. She produced a shallow crater and a loud, dull smacking sound with her head. A few seconds later she sat up and blinked at the open window six stories above her.

"Ow! Son of a bitch!" She stood and brushed off the dirt from her favorite yellow t-shirt.

"Cricket, you utter shit!"

"Yes?" he replied from his perch on a bush a few feet away. Rabbit blinked at him.

"Why did you try to kill me?" she shouted, and then added, "And why didn't it work?"

"Shh! The whole point was to get you out of here unnoticed, and here you go shouting and causing a scene."

"It's not funny. You pushed me out a window. Why am I still alive and in one piece, unlike your last victim?"

Splinter-of-Jade tilted his bulbous head to one side. "Obviously you're a fellow Immortal like me. A little fall into a flower patch is nothing if you don't even have the three worms of mortality inside your body to bring death. You're made of strong stuff, girl."

She shook her dirty, disarrayed hair. "I'm not immortal. You're insane."

"I'm just as confused as you are," he replied with a shrug of his hind legs. "You ought to have known. Immortality is achieved through years and years of personal cultivation, not by accident. I just assumed your youthful demeanor was an intentional disguise."

"No, I really am just twenty." She was developing a slight headache, whether from the six-storey dive or from this conversation she didn't know. "I've never heard of anyone becoming immortal at my age, and definitely not without knowing about it. I drink a lot of yogurt, could that be it?"

"Probably not. It is a good start, though."

"Wait," she asked, eyes narrowing, "what made you so sure I wouldn't die, anyway?"

"I wasn't." She would have punched him right then, if he had offered a big enough target for a solid hit. "I just guessed."

She yanked a flower out of the ground and threw it at him. It made a very disappointing missile.

"Just listen," he continued, "what is the most common feature of human Immortals?"

Rabbit thought back to what she had read in her

history classes about the legendary freaky Daoists. "They ride around on cranes and pink clouds a lot?" she ventured.

"That, and they are drunk all the time," the cricket answered. "You were acting drunk, and also acting rashly, as if your body knew it couldn't be harmed. I've seen enough of the Old Men in my day to know what that sort of fearless compulsiveness adds up to. Not to mention a few ancient indiscretions of my own."

Rabbit didn't consider that sufficient evidence at all, considering she'd just been pushed out a window on it. "What if I had just been *drunk*?" she shouted.

"You're raising your voice again," Splinter-of-Jade chided. He hopped to another bush. "Let's get moving, and be quiet now."

Chapter Four

Two thieves are on the prowl; Forever proves to be just a brand name.

Rabbit and the cricket champion slipped out the un-manned back gate of the Green Garden Towers; the guard there had also apparently gone up front amidst the chaos Splinter-of-Jade had precipitated.

"Shit!" said Rabbit when she noticed the loaded bike rack on the other side. "I left my ride in, the street out front, didn't even lock it up. It's probably in another province by now. I'll be back in a minute!" She jogged along the wall, turning two corners to arrive out front of the complex. She was walking and breathless by the time she reached the scene of the crime. An ambulance had already arrived and loaded up the businessman, but a large crowd was still gathered around his landing spot and the vehicle itself. The ambulance driver was shouting at everyone to move back and let him out, with little effect. Rabbit pushed her way through the mob and saw that yes, indeed, her bicycle was most definitely gone.

"Shit!" she shouted again. "Where's my bike?"

A short, seedy-looking old man standing next to her in a cheap blue nylon jacket sized her up, a limp cigarette hanging from his lower lip.

"Little Flea got it. You just missed him by a few seconds."

"What, he stole my bike?"

"No," he answered. "It wasn't locked up."

"That bastard! I need it!"

The old man scratched the three long whiskers on his chin. "I probably wouldn't have let him get away if I'd have known. I thought it belonged to the dead guy. I was kind of wondering why he rode it out the window." He turned and started fighting his way back out of the mob, shouting over his shoulder. "Fine, I'll go get help. Flea needs to be taught a lesson anyway, stealing a ride in the middle of a crowd like that. Dumb kid."

Rabbit pushed her way out after the stranger. By the time she reached the edge of the crowd, he was already running across the wide street and shouting at a tall, muscular garbage collector who was sweeping up litter on the opposite side. The collector, anonymous in the undersized dark blue uniform, neon orange vest, and cap of a municipal worker, hung his long-handled broom and dustpan back onto the rack on the side of his standard-issue dark green tricycle and pedaled it over to the old man. A short but lively exchange ensued. A moment later, the old man jumped on the back of the tricycle, straddling the closed wooden garbage bin. They rode across to Rabbit.

"Climb on!" the old man with the whiskers shouted, and motioned to her frantically. "We've got some catching up to do." She shrugged and climbed onto the rear end of the bin behind him, holding on to the uncomfortably greasy edges of the lid. Maybe she really was permanently drunk, she told herself as the driver pushed off eastwards. That would explain an awful lot.

"Don't worry miss, we'll catch up with the culprit," the trash-man promised over his shoulder. He was young, strong, and large all over, but Rabbit thought he was being a little optimistic. The three-wheeler was practically crawling down the bike lane under the combined weight of three riders.

"Maybe I should just run after him," Rabbit offered. The two strangers gave no reply. She was preparing to hop off the back of the trash bin when the vehicle jolted. The riders looked around in confusion. All of a sudden they began

to pick up some speed, accelerating quickly to an immense speed. The old man let out a battle whoop as the tricycle fairly flew along Qiushi Road. Rabbit held on tighter to the bucking bin lid. The trash-man held the pedals stationary, gripped the handlebars in his huge hands for dear life and shouted over the mighty wind.

"Where to?"

"Jiaogong Road! Jiaogong Road!" the old man yelled, his three whiskers streaming over his shoulder and brushing Rabbit's nose. "That's where he'll be headed, I'm sure of it. Turn here!" He signaled to the left as they approached the T-junction behind Bao Chu Hill. A pair of bicyclists coming out of the hypermarket behind the Dragon Stadium veered off course and crashed into the bushes as the loaded tricycle shot into the intersection. The trash-man strained at the handlebars and the tires squealed. The old man screamed along with them. The vehicle didn't quite make the turn; it only got close enough for the driver to ramp it onto the tree-lined sidewalk. Pedestrians obligingly hopped out of the way at the sound of the mad ringing of the trash-man's bell. He maneuvered back into the street at the first opportunity. There, fortunately, there were only a few taxis and buses to get around, and Rabbit and her companions were quickly overtaking all of them.

"Turn North now! This is Jiaogong!" shouted the middle rider as the very next intersection drew near. They were apparently looping all the way around the back of the Dragon Stadium; Jiaogong Road ran in the same direction as Qiushi Road, but on the opposite side of the stadium. More importantly, it was also much busier.

"Should we be worried about this?" Rabbit shouted in her companion's ear, his whiskers tickling her cheek.

"No, look!" He pointed up ahead to the intersection. She thought he was pointing out the red traffic light, and wondered how that was supposed to make her feel any better. Then she saw what he was really indicating: her second-hand, dark blue, Forever brand bicycle, waiting for the light to change with a handful of other cycles in the bike lane ahead. A short young man with a white jacket was sitting on it, staring over his shoulder wide-eyed. The old man in

front of Rabbit shouted another battle cry. The thief pushed over an old lady and her bike who were blocking his way and sped off through the intersection. They followed at high velocity, tires screeching again as they rounded the corner through the paths of three startled taxi drivers and a gang of school children. This time they made the turn, and were upon the thief known as Little Flea all at once. Rabbit was afraid they were going to crash into him or pass him by, but their speed magically decreased to match that of the stolen bicycle until they were simply following behind at a bike's length. The thief was still fleeing as fast as he could pedal, though, so both riders were forced to weave in and out of the thicker traffic in Jiaogong Road's bike lane with the aid of liberal use of their bells. Little Flea ventured a few quick glances behind his back, looking more and more frightened each time.

"Is he just going to keep riding like this?" Rabbit shouted.

"Probably," the whiskered one replied, "until he crashes at least. Flea isn't the smartest bicycle thief that ever lived, if you hadn't noticed yet."

The culprit and his pursuers passed along the length of the stadium and the hypermarket, and reached the next intersection with Tianmushan Road. Here, by some grace of Heaven, the traffic lights were on their side. Little Flea took the opportunity to speed up his flight even faster. Whatever the old man thought of his intelligence, he had stamina; Rabbit had to give him that.

Just beyond the crossroads the road met one of the many stretches of fragrant canals that drained and connected many areas of Hangzhou into the Qiantang River on the East side of the city. Jiaogong Road crossed over the canal and its willow-lined landscaping in a graceful arch with a low railing. The bicycle thief, pedaling for his life with all the terror of a hare pursued by a tiger, didn't notice any of this. He hit the incline of the bridge and was lifted clean off his seat; the hard landing threw him off-center, and before he knew it his front tire was up against the railing, which was only a cursory barrier. It was more of a cautionary reminder than an actual safety measure, in fact. In Little Flea's case it served only to launch him and his stolen second-hand, dark blue, Forever

brand bicycle off the bridge and set them on a parabolic course for the greenish-brown water. The three riders on the Sanitation Department tricycle could only hear the splash. At the sound, the supernatural force driving their vehicle ceased and the trash-man was able to brake to a stop at the apex of the bridge. A gang of seven young boys in matching school jackets were already leaning over the railing and laughing when Rabbit and her accomplices dismounted and reached the edge. The old man whistled, then broke out laughing even louder than all seven school boys at once. Rabbit watched the hapless thief swim, thrashing, to the shore and climb out onto the bank. Two old ladies had been playing badminton in the canal-side stretch of park where Little Flea lifted himself onto solid ground. As soon as he rose to his feet they set about beating his dripping body indignantly with their badminton rackets, shouting terrible curses at him and his poor driving skills. The old man and the boys laughed all the harder beside Rabbit.

She scanned the silty green depths of the canal for any sign of her poor second-hand, dark blue, Forever brand bicycle, but it was futile. The garbage collector ran his huge hand over the dent in the railing and shook his head sadly. "Sorry, Miss, but your fine bicycle belongs to the mighty canal god now. It's been cleaned away." He squinted at her shoulder. "Pardon, but you have a bug on your shirt." Rabbit craned her neck and tried to focus on the fuzzy black spot.

"Cricket?"

"Not just any cricket!" responded Splinter-of-Jade, his voice booming in her ear. The tri-whiskered old man paused in his red-faced, hysterical laughter to turn and stare at the insect.

"Ouch, not so loud, I'm right here," Rabbit scolded. "I didn't know you came along, have you been with me the whole time?"

"But of course," the champion answered, "who did you imagine was down there in the tricycle kicking the wheel to move it along at a reasonable pace? I can't say I think very highly of your choice of pursuit vehicle."

Rabbit's new acquaintances stared at her and the insect from both sides. She shifted her foot uncomfortably and shrugged. After a few

moments the garbage collector broke the stare and returned to his vehicle, pushing it to the edge of the bridge out of the nascent traffic jam it was creating. He returned to his previous position.

"What..." he started to ask, then stopped when he noticed a piece of wadded-up newspaper wedged under the railing by his foot. He bent down, picked it up, took it back to his refuse cart and threw it in the back, returned to his spot once more, and started over. "What sort of woman are you, exactly?"

"Just an ordinary architecture student from Zhe Da," she answered.

"Not to mention an Immortal," Splinter-of-Jade added. Rabbit tried to swat the cricket, but he sprang off her shoulder on to a knob on the railing.

"Don't listen to the bug," she said.

"An Immortal, with a talking cricket!" the old man exclaimed, deeply impressed. The garbage collector bowed low.

"No I'm not! Quit that!" she pleaded.

"Of course you are, don't sell yourself short," Splinter-of-Jade chimed in. "I pushed you out of a tall building myself." He chirped in amusement.

Rabbit gave up. "Fine, have it your way. Maybe I'm an Immortal, maybe I have a talking bug. That's not important. What's important is, I have a long way to go today and I need my bicycle."

The trash-man looked to the fetid waters, then the noisy stream of traffic on the bridge, as if surveying Heaven and Earth.

"Like I said, your bicycle has been nullified by the god of this canal. Blind Fish is his name, if I recall, and they say has a fondness for cigarettes. You could offer him a few, but I don't see it helping much. That particular bicycle is no longer of this world."

Rabbit wasn't sure about all that, but she knew the giant garbage collector was essentially correct. She would have to start thinking about life without her second-hand, dark blue, Forever brand bicycle. She looked down at the culprit, who was still being berated by the two old ladies wielding their badminton rackets threateningly.

"What about him?" she asked, thrusting her chin in the direction of the hapless, dripping thief. The old man stifled another laugh.

"Forget him," he said, twirling his three whiskers around a finger. "He's not going to help you get your bike back, nor do I reckon he'll steal any more after this morning. To tell the truth, he has more of the disposition for selling fried squid tentacles on the street than a life of thieving and high-speed chases."

"Just what is your relation to him, anyway?" Rabbit questioned suspiciously.

"Oh, he was my apprentice, up until this morning at least. I'll never take him back after this disaster." He broke into manic laughter again as Little Flea made a break for freedom down below, the two old ladies hot on his heels swinging rackets high.

"So *you* are a bicycle thief too?" Rabbit was outraged.

"Not just any. Master Ling, the bicycle charmer, at your service, miss Immortal." He bowed.

Rabbit turned to the other stranger for support in her indignation. He merely bowed as well!

"I am Ninth Goldfish, Northern Water Agent. Likewise at your service."

She shot Splinter-of-Jade the nastiest look she had ever given anyone, human or insect, in her life. He answered with a chirp of pure sadistic glee.

Chapter Five

Two skilled generals meet across a river; Rabbit is led beyond the Frontier by an Agent of Water.

Further confusion on the bridge was mercifully deflected by the abrupt arrival of a uniformed policeman, who rode up alongside the group on a shiny, oversized motorcycle and yelled at them to get out of the road if they were so intent on holding a social gathering. He stayed on the peak of the bridge and watched them pointedly until they continued across to the other side, the trash-man pushing his cycle down the slope. Ninth Goldfish gestured to a rickety little tea stall hidden among the dreary residences just behind the canal-side park. The badly hand-painted sign over the shop read "Emperor's Tea Shop of Excellence".

"This is all too much. Let's go over there and

sort things out with help from tea. No confusion can withstand green tea."

Rabbit was starting to appreciate the garbage collector's sensibility. She followed him down the narrow lane between houses and landscaping to the shop. Master Ling ran ahead, waving; apparently the owner, an even more wrinkled old man with a thick wool cap and a tiny wife, was a friend of his. They pulled out three folding chairs and a low square table, all of which were in an extreme state of wear, and sat in the alley under the shade of one of the willow trees planted along the length of the canal.

"You see this?" Master Ling asked when they were seated, stabbing a bony finger at the wobbly wooden table. The surface was carved with a slightly uneven grid, divided in two by a blank strip running down the center between him and Rabbit, with two diagonal lines extending through four squares on each side. It was obviously a home-made chess board.

"Anyone think they would make a worthy opponent on this field of battle for a veteran general?"

Splinter-of-Jade leapt from Rabbit's shoulder, where he had perched himself again, onto the center of the board.

"Do I hear a challenge?" he bellowed. "I, who was an unaccredited contributing author of the great Chess Classic? Don't dare bring up the name of this illustrious game around me, bicycle thief!"

Master Ling threw his head back and laughed. "Bring out the armies, Master Joy! It's time for the Warring States all over again!"

The cackling shopkeeper--the Joy in question--brought out a big plastic vacuum thermos of hot water, three glasses containing small heaps of tea leaves, and a box of round wooden chess pieces. He set the thermos on the floor and the glasses around the edge of the table, and dumped the pieces in the middle of the board.

"Have fun!" he laughed, and returned to his seat inside to watch the game.

The kings were placed in their castles, the cannons stationed, and the soldiers set in charge formation, and the battle began. It was Splinter-of-Jade's turn to move first; he sat on top of the king piece, head twitching side to side, to

meditate on his strategy. While he considered the game ahead, Ninth Goldfish poured the hot water and started the interrogation.

"So, Miss, how old are you really?"

Rabbit rolled her eyes. "I really am just twenty. I'm just an architecture student at Zhe Da. People call me Rabbit. Six stories isn't really all that high, if you think about it. I have a pretty hard head."

Having said her piece, she took a sip of tea and burned her tongue.

"In denial," Splinter-of-Jade said in a stage whisper, and shoved a chess piece bearing the soldier character forward one space.

"We could find out easily enough," suggested Master Ling. "Just try and kill yourself again, but try harder this time. Let me break a glass and stab it in your eye or something."

She shook her head. He shrugged and returned his attention to the game.

"So we'll let that one rest for now," Ninth Goldfish offered. "Maybe you're just not *especially* mortal. Now, am I correct in assuming that your pet cricket is, in fact, an Immortal?"

"No and yes," answered Splinter-of-Jade. "Immortal, but not her pet. I'm through with formal relationships with humans as of this morning. You've really gone downhill in recent decades, no offense intended."

"Fine. Now that we've established that, what is this urgent errand you two are involved in which requires immediate access to a bicycle? Is it celestial in nature, or Earthly? If you don't mind me asking."

"I'd be interested to hear that myself," the cricket champion chimed in. "I still haven't heard the full story myself."

Master Ling held up a skinny finger, pushed one of his own soldiers forward a space confidently, and also turned to Rabbit to listen. She shifted nervously and blew on her tea, face reddening.

"I'm going to Six Harmonies Pagoda to count the steps," she announced with a weak smile. Splinter-of-Jade chirped.

"Really now. Are you a drunken Immortal, or just naturally insane?" he said. "I can't make up my mind."

The two men looked a bit more impressed. "Counting the steps, now?" Master Ling commented slowly. "Is that something you do?"

"Not usually. It's some sort of class assignment, on account of it being Double Nines today."

"What's become of education these days?" lamented Master Ling.

Ninth Goldfish silenced him with a wave of his meaty hand. "Whatever your reasons for going to Six Harmonies Pagoda are, what's important is that it's a long ways away. On the opposite side of the city and the West Lake, and through the mountains to the banks of the Qiantang River. You need transportation. History teaches that the actions of Immortals, or at least the friends of Immortals, are not to be questioned. That always ends rather nasty. For best results, we should merely help them out when given the chance and earn a little merit. It's an uncommon enough honor."

"Well thank you, I guess," Rabbit replied, "but I don't think it's that big of a deal. I just have kind of a crazy math professor back at the University. I don't know if there's any merit on the line here." She would have given up on the whole fiasco quite a ways back, in fact, if all these other people hadn't gotten involved. Now the inertia was carrying her along, so she might as well enjoy the ride whether she still wanted to go or not.

Splinter-of-Jade, seeing little value in this line of conversation, turned back to the game. He stood poised on the king piece, completely still, for a few seconds, then hopped over to his left cannon and kicked it sideways two spaces. His opponent leaned back, dumbstruck, then let out a wail.

"How can this be!" he shouted. The tea shop keeper jumped to his feet and scurried over to get a closer look at the board, then stood over it shaking his head in shock. Rabbit didn't buy it.

"Quit joking around. The cricket only moved twice, and you once. How could that affect the whole game so much?"

"That *was* the whole game, girl!" growled the old bicycle thief, on the verge of tears. "There's no point in dragging it on and prolonging the inevitable. What you see there is the start of a partially reversed 'Yu the Great at the Gorge' attack! Unmistakable. I was going for a 'Camels Charging across the Sand' movement with a strengthened left flank--my personal invention, thoroughly unbeatable--but I clearly underestimated the foresight of my opponent in defense and the mobility of his chariots. I never had a chance against one so well-versed in the

Chess Classic."

The winner held his antennae high, basking in the praise. "I warned you, I contributed three chapters to the third edition of the Classic. I made up 'Yu the Great at the Gorge' one morning while watching fish swim up a stream. But I kept my own personal variation on the tactic out of the book. And there are plenty more where that came from."

Master Ling bowed his head in the humility of well-deserved defeat. Rabbit nodded and feigned belief. Ninth Goldfish tapped her on the shoulder.

"I have a bicycle for you to use," he said. The others turned to listen. "It's not far from here. It will get you to Six Harmonies Pagoda with no difficulties, and through Heaven and Hell too if you so require. It's a *very* good bicycle. Are you interested?"

Rabbit blinked. "I guess I am."

"So be it." His expression grew more grave. "Unfortunately, it's at my living quarters, which are on the edge of the Frontier. Things aren't very... *nice* out there."

The name Frontier meant nothing to Rabbit. She shrugged and nodded once, only very slightly disquieted.

"I guess I should stick with you," Splinter-of-Jade offered. "We Immortals have to flock together in this day and age."

Rabbit let that one slide. "Fine, do what you want. Let's just go get this bike."

Splinter-of-Jade hopped from the chess board to the handle-bars of the Sanitation Department tricycle with a single mighty bound, scattering a few chess pieces. Rabbit and the garbage collector left the table, while the crestfallen Master Ling and his friend the shopkeeper began to set up the board again without a word.

"Sorry about the state of your seat," Ninth Goldfish said to Rabbit, gesturing at the garbage bin that made up the rear half of his vehicle. "This thing isn't really constructed for giving rides. I don't imagine you wish to walk, though."

"Oh no, it's quite comfortable," she lied, preparing to lift herself up on top of the bin.

"Wait!" he interjected. "Let me at least get rid of that unpleasant smell and some unnecessary weight." He lifted up the lid and retrieved his

long bamboo-handled broom and dustpan from their rack on the side. Sweeping up the small amount of refuse he had already collected that morning from the bin into the dustpan, he ran across the grass to the high edge of the canal and tossed it over. He then bowed towards the water and returned, mumbling something under his breath.

"There, much better." He smiled, returned his tools to their hooks alongside the bin, and slammed the lid closed. Rabbit thanked him and climbed on board, holding on to the smooth wooden lip of the lid as before. The cart was old, and rust showed through the dark green paint in places, but it was of solid, very heavy construction. Rabbit couldn't believe they hadn't killed anyone--particularly themselves--on their mad dash after the bicycle thief. Ninth Goldfish must be even stronger than he looks, Rabbit thought, to have kept this thing under control at the speed the cricket had had them going.

"So are all garbage-men in the habit of disposing of their cargo into the city's canals?" Rabbit asked Ninth Goldfish as he pedaled back up the alley towards the main road they had left. "Not to criticize, but doesn't that seem a little counter-productive?"

The rider took the jibe as a serious question, and answered without turning his head away from the road. "Agents of Water usually carry our collected refuse out to the great Oblivion Grounds and Reverting Plants on the outer edges of the Frontier. That's ideally how it should be, anyway. If we need to nullify it quickly, it's acceptable to offer it to the Canal Gods--our immediate elemental superiors--to deal with. They, in turn, deliver it to the King of the Grand Canal and the Dragon of the Qiantang River, the greatest water-deities in the city. It works perfectly well, if we don't overburden the system and if we make our offerings with all proper respect."

"Sounds like you trash-men have quite a system worked out," said Rabbit, rather confused. "I didn't know litter was such a cosmic matter."

Cricket cut in from his perch on the bolt at the center of the tricycle's thick iron handlebars. "The Agents of Water aren't just trash-men. They started way back in the Ming Dynasty, if I remember correctly, as a sort of elemental cult

out West dedicated to dragons and fish and other stuff related to water and bringing rain. You know how those Westerners are about their rain. Anyway, they eventually spread all over the Middle Kingdom--always looking for wetter climates--but mostly just laid low and kept their doctrines pretty secret. I didn't even hear about them until just before the time of the Manchu invasion, when I was sold to one of the sect members. Never had so many baths in all my life, before or since. Completely obsessive." Rabbit couldn't see the look on Ninth Goldfish's face from where she was sitting, but he was sitting up particularly straight. "Alright," she interrupted, "how do we get from there to... performing vital maintenance duties for the City Government?"

"That's easy," Splinter-of-Jade answered. "The Water Agent cult was always popular among those elements of society dedicated to cleanliness, because of the impressive symbolism it lent their job. When the Cultural Revolution came along, the sect was formally disbanded elsewhere as superstition and religion. But a blind eye was turned on the cleaners, because the superstition happened to make them much more dedicated in their work, and if there were two items that were in short supply in those days, they were dedication and cleanliness. These days, almost all of the garbage collectors in Hangzhou call themselves Water Agents, and pick up litter like it was a holy duty."

Ninth Goldfish braked for a red light at the crowded intersection of Jiaogong Road and Wenyi Road. He took the opportunity to turn in his seat and regain control of the discussion.

"Of the five elements, two dominate in a city like Hangzhou: Earth and Water. To be precise, this is only a city because the Earth element is controlled." He stamped his foot three times on the pavement of the road to demonstrate this point. "In the natural order of things, Wood controls Earth; that's why the forests must be removed to allow people to usurp its power. If this control isn't sustained, however, the city returns to the Earth with no Wood to balance it out."

The light changed and other cyclists started ringing their bells, so the Water Agent continued his lecture as he pedaled across the

intersection. Rabbit knew more than enough about the five traditional elements, their generation, and their dominance from her classes in ancient Chinese architecture, so Ninth Goldfish's logic was actually easy for her to follow, if a little ridiculous.

"Now you see the importance of rounding up refuse from the city streets. It represents pure, untamed Earth element encroaching on our dominion, threatening our control. Thus the Sanitation Department of the Hangzhou Municipal Government calls on us, the Agents of Water, not merely to clean up, but to fight an endless war for the survival of our fair city, and even more importantly, its *feng shui*."

"Wait," Rabbit cut in, "That doesn't sound right. I thought the Earth element controlled Water, not the other way around. That's the logic behind dams and earthworks."

"True," the Agent replied, "and that's why it's in our best interests to keep fighting this battle. The city is laid out around the West Lake, with the mountains behind. This gives us some of the best *feng shui* in China, but it also represents 'Water Under Siege.' How do we fight back? Remember what element Water generates." He reached back and tapped the side of the wooden bin on the back of his cycle. "Long-handled bamboo brooms and dustpans, and wooden bins, all of which we create for ourselves by hand following ancient designs, are our weapons against untamed Earth."

He pulled to a stop again just in front of another bridge over a canal. This canal also had a strip of trees and grass on the south bank, but only a blank concrete wall opposite them. A few smokestacks rose up ahead. They had left almost all of the traffic behind at the last intersection.

"Now you should be able to understand why I was hesitant to bring you here to the Frontier. This canal marks the Northern border of the Municipal Government's high-priority sanitation districts. Few Water Agents venture out into these streets to collect garbage these days, so they are increasingly reverting to wild Earth, more so the closer you get to the countryside. I only had to move out here a year ago when I lost my apartment on Xue Yuan Road. I don't think I'll ever get used to the place."

His description gave her a few good chills, but Rabbit didn't have time for all this superstition. "I come from the countryside. I think I can handle some dirt." Splinter-of-Jade seconded her with an impatient chirp.

"Okay, but you might want to cover your nose." The Water Agent carried them up and over the bridge and turned down a narrow lane along the canal wall. This lane was as small and potholed as the one where they had stopped for tea and chess previously, but it was deserted, unshaded by willows, and piled with scraps of wet, molding cardboard.

Chapter Six

In the Frontier, a mysterious vehicle is found; trash-man and barge-man engage in the requisite prolonged antiphonal discourse, as per the demands of literary tradition.

The Frontier didn't turn out to be anything spectacular, but Rabbit had to admit it was a little unnerving. She had grown up in a small town surrounded by rural mountains, and she didn't mind the big urban environs of Hangzhou either, but the two didn't mix well. Trash and scrap metal was piled in every available bit of empty space--mostly the narrow alleys between roaring factories and blocks of grimy flats. An inordinate number of dead rats were also scattered among the refuse. Even the air seemed deeply unwholesome. It was enough to get her thinking about the apocalyptic vision of "wild Earth take-over" Ninth Goldfish had been going on about. She promised herself not to take waste management so lightly in the future.

The Water Agent navigated his way through the trash down a disorienting maze of alleys. Rabbit spotted a few small canals, but they were an unhealthy black color and choked with garbage. She even saw someone tending to a patch of vegetables in the dry black soil between two factories, an image that turned her stomach. Most of the other human beings she saw were men riding from place to place on rusted

bicycles, splashing through foul dark puddles and bumping over the edges of old, solidified mounds of discarded sand. The only other signs of life were two dirty children who ran across the road, shouting at each other, and disappeared through a gateway like a pair of ghosts. Ninth Goldfish finally stopped in front of a low building from which tinny music could be heard. He jumped off the cycle with a sigh and shrugged to Rabbit. She dropped down beside him and landed on something squishy. "Nice neighborhood," Splinter-of-Jade commented, and leapt to his accustomed spot on her shoulder. "I've seen worse, but not since the nineteen-sixties. I forget sometimes how soft and glamorous the life of a priceless champion fighter is. It's nice to be reminded occasionally. Depressing, though."

They walked inside, through a squealing rusty gate and down an unlit hallway--also piled to the ceiling with cardboard--to the Water Agent's apartment. A single beady eye tracked their passage from behind a stained curtain by the front door. Ninth Goldfish shoved open his stuck door with a broad shoulder and turned on the light. Rabbit's peek inside wasn't met by the blank, dreary walls she had expected. Scraps of metal hung from old nails all over the room, right up to the ceiling. Steel bowls and hubcaps, rusty scissors and beaten signs, heavy chains, and a hundred other miscellaneous metal items. She leaned in the doorway and scanned both sides, reluctant to enter. There, on the right side of the room, a shiny golden bicycle hung on two spikes over the sagging bed. Her jaw dropped, and Splinter-of-Jade chirped despite himself. It wasn't the least bit tarnished or rusty; it was dazzling! The yellow frame supported two sturdy wheels and a well-padded leather seat. She walked up to it, awed. It didn't look brand new, but rather well worn in, like it had been ridden for a thousand kilometers and would still be good for ten thousand more without so much as a tire pumping. It was the kind of bicycle that would probably go for a higher price at a second-hand bike market than most brand new cycles. Rabbit searched for a manufacturer's logo, but there were no stickers or plaques anywhere on the frame. All she could find was a little picture of a lotus flower engraved on the ends of the handlebars.

"Will that do?" asked Ninth Goldfish, grinning. He lifted the machine down from its mounts and set it down on the floor, bouncing it on the tires. "I found this along Tianmushan Road a few weeks ago, abandoned in the middle of the street! I could see it was going to cause an accident sooner or later, so I retrieved it. Without a license plate or serial number, there wasn't much I could do but bring it home for my wall. A bicycle with no cargo space isn't much use to me, and the unlicensed bicycle market is one activity I'd rather not get involved in. Now I know who it was intended for, though."

Rabbit stroked the leather seat lovingly. "It's the most beautiful bicycle ever! I'll name it Golden Wheel."

Splinter-of-Jade jumped down onto the handlebars, finding a perfect perch right in the middle. He surveyed the room from his throne. "I don't get it, why all the scrap metal? Aren't there places for you trash guys to drop that off for recycling?"

The Water Agent flicked a stainless-steel bowl, producing a clear ringing tone. "In the cycle of elements, Metal generates Water. It seems like good *feng shui* for an Agent like myself. Besides, it's so shiny, I just can't help myself."

Rabbit wasn't listening. She rang her new bicycle's bell over and over until the cricket champion was forced to throw himself on it and silence the dinging. She knelt down to whisper to the bike and wipe the dust off its spokes with the corner of her favorite yellow shirt. Ninth Goldfish shuffled his foot uncomfortably. "Well, I'm glad you like it. Like I said before, it'll get you to Six Harmonies Pagoda sure enough. You'd better get a move on though."

Rabbit stood and kowtowed to the Water Agent, which did nothing to relieve his awkwardness.

"Ten thousand thanks for this gift! I'll return Golden Wheel as soon as I'm finished, and I won't allow so much as a single one of her spokes to get bent."

He shook his head hastily. "No need, no need! I can find plenty of other things to cover that space on my wall. This machine obviously means more to you than to me, and you haven't got any other bicycle now, remember? Just promise not to get this one stolen."

Rabbit hopped up and down ecstatically. "Ten thousand *ten thousands* of thanks!"

"Fine," Splinter-of-Jade concluded, raising his voice. "We've established that it's a very nice bike. Meanwhile, so far you've managed to spend all morning heading North, which is, coincidentally, exactly the wrong direction to get to Six Harmonies Pagoda. Shall we continue our drooling on the road?"

Rabbit nodded and turned Golden Wheel towards the door. Ninth Goldfish took a chain, complete with lock and key, down off another nail and dropped it in the bicycle's basket. "You'll definitely be wanting one of these," he explained, "especially if everyone else reacts to this bike the way you did."

They returned down the hallway to smoggy daylight; the single eye behind the curtain widened and then disappeared as they passed with Golden Wheel. Outside, Ninth Goldfish mounted his own vehicle and said, "I'll take you back to the other side of the Frontier. There's no way I'm letting you wander around out here alone. There are worse things than smells in these parts, and there are some really nasty smells."

Rabbit climbed on her new bicycle gingerly and sighed. Even the drab Frontier lane seemed to brighten as soon as she was sitting on that strong, stable seat. Her brief moment of confidence from earlier in the morning returned as if by magic. She almost did feel like an Immortal now.

"Lead on, Water Agent," she commanded imperially.

They followed the labyrinth of streets in reverse, riding faster now. The sinister environment looked less intimidating now, merely a little depressing. It seemed almost at once that they reached the bridge over the canal again. Rabbit stopped at the middle of the bridge and turned to her benefactor.

"I guess you'll be wanting to go collect some trash now. I mean, wild Earth."

He was about to respond, a disappointed look already on his face, when a shout interrupted the farewell.

"Number Nine, you old rag-picker!"

Ninth Goldfish looked around in confusion until he spotted the rusty tub of a cargo barge

motoring its way down the canal. It was empty, and almost scraping the walls on both sides. A skinny, shirtless man stood at the prow waving. The Water Agent waved with both hands and shouted back.

"Float-along Ji, you coolie! Are you bound for the Qiantang River to beg for another load?"

"Yes, for the construction business is booming! But at least it's not going to be stinking garbage!" came the retort.

"I was thinking, being a bus driver would be a big move up for you. I've even got your first passenger right here. Two tickets, please?"

"Come on down! Just try not to fall in the water and get yourself nullified!" The barge captain killed his motor and coasted along.

"Follow me," said Ninth Goldfish to Rabbit.

"We can start you off in style, with a morning cruise. Ji will get you all the way into the middle of town without having to push a single pedal." He rode down onto the path along the green Southern bank, leaving her with no choice but to follow. "Sounds like a decent fellow to me," Splinter-of-Jade concluded. The two riders pulled alongside the barge and dismounted, passing their cycles across the narrow gap to the barge-man. He casually rolled them over the edge of the empty craft's cavernous scoop-shaped cargo bay with two echoing booms that made Rabbit's heart leap into her throat. She was increasingly unsure of this choice of transportation. Ninth Goldfish jumped on board, and again she followed. They walked to the rear deck and sat on the edge, their feet swinging over the cargo bay. Ji leaned at the wheel and switched the motor back on with a groaning rumble.

"So, where are you taking this young Miss today, you old faker?"

"If you must know, I'm escorting this pair of illustrious *Immortals* on a celestial errand. The second, as you can see, has taken on the form of a tiny cricket for reasons best left to Heavenly beings."

"You don't say. I must admit, I never knew collecting litter was so *thrilling*, not to mention *important*."

"By no means!" shouted the Water Agent in mock indignation. "The Immortals could manage just fine without me, I'm guiding them simply as a pleasant diversion, seeing as my

occupation leaves me with such copious *free time*."

"Uh oh, I should have guessed," groaned Splinter-of-Jade in a lowered voice.

"What?" Rabbit whispered back.

"These two are going to have a dialogue. Have you ever read any of the Literary Classics?"

"A few," she lied. Every student in the country was *assigned* them to read in school, anyway. She herself had opted to watch the television serial versions instead.

"There's always a debate thrown in between a fisherman and a woodsman, about whose life is the more care-free existence. Same thing in music and opera. It was amusing once, but gets damn tiring after a few centuries of it. Neither side ever wins, of course. The argument has carried on in one form or another ever since out of pure habit, though there aren't many members of the original occupations left around here any more."

Captain Ji smiled at the cricket champion.

"That's quite a learned bug there. Have you hired a tutor too now? Mighty civilized."

"Not half as civilized as driving heavy machinery loaded with bags of concrete. How do you sleep at night with the entire Hangzhou construction industry depending on you like that?"

Ji shook his head condescendingly. "Let me tell you about life on the waters. Worries don't like water--they can't swim, see. I just point my boat East, let those sweating porters at the docks break their backs loading it up with bags of concrete, then I turn her nose around West and head back, singing songs to myself in the sun. Even if I nod off and scrape into the sides a bit, what of it? The loving walls gently bounce me back. Even the fisherman, struggling with his tangled nets and fish guts, has nothing on my life."

It was Ninth Goldfish's turn. He sang his reply in verse form, swinging his feet over the edge.

"They call me a Water Agent,
And say I have a vital role,
But if they knew how easy my life is,
They would all want to take up my broom.

For even the birds over the Autumn Moon
Pavilion

Do Nature's work serenading the West Lake,
Yet do they feel it is a great burden
To fly free and sing their sweet songs?

It isn't any harder to wander the sunny streets
And sweep up a stray piece of paper,
Taking a break to listen to the birds
Whenever I feel wistful."

Seeing the stakes had been raised, Ji responded
in like form without a moment's hesitation.

"Walking the streets with your own tired feet,
Pedaling hard all day with the very same feet.
How can this compare for luxury with a boat
Carrying one along the shady canals with a
smooth engine?

I can sit here all day long,
And only have to move a single arm
To turn around when I reach the end.
If I worked any less I'd be sleeping all day.

Who will ply the busy streets
When the cool shaded canals
Offer such a wide, empty path
For one to sail up and down?"

The song passed back to the Water Agent, who
rose to his feet to finish it off.

"If there's one thing that removes
All the worry from one's world,
It's not having a job that you love today,
It's knowing you'll have a job tomorrow.

Sixty years ago buildings were built with
wood.
Thirty years ago buildings weren't built at all.
Ten years from now, who can say what
people will build?
One cannot count on hauling concrete for
the span of a lifetime.

Sixty years ago the streets were filled with
trash.
Thirty years ago the streets were filled with
trash.
Ten years from now, the streets will be filled
with trash.

A garbage collector lacks not in peace of
mind."

Rabbit applauded the final blow. The captain
laughed and turned his face back to the canal
dismissively.

"Did our Water Agent win?" she asked the
cricket champion on her shoulder.

"Of course not," he answered, "nobody's ever
allowed to win the antiphonal discourse. He did
come dangerously close with those last verses,
though. I think you need practice, trash-man!"

"I'll start taking advice from you the day I hear
the debate between the cricket and the silk-
worm," the Agent retorted.

"Not likely. There's nothing care-free and
boring about my occupation. The day the life of
a fighting cricket becomes idyllic is the day I
apply for rebirth. Besides, silk-worms are
beneath contempt."

"Speaking of contempt," Captain Ji shouted,
waving again, "Is that a lowly bicycle thief I see
up ahead?"

Rabbit looked up and saw the miniature tea
shop, where old Master Ling was still hunched
over the board opposite a much-wrinkled rival.
He looked up to see who was shouting, and
waved back. He then pushed a piece with his
finger, sending his opponent into a flood of
tears, and made haste to catch up with the
watercraft.

"Just doing the morning rounds of the chess
circuit!" the thief shouted as he jumped nimbly
onto the deck. "Funny seeing you two again so
soon." It was only then that Rabbit realized they
were not, in fact, on the same stretch of canal
where her old bicycle had taken its final dive;
this was an entirely different canal with an
entirely different tea stall and an entirely
different chess board. The old bicycle thief,
however, was the same as always.

"On your way downtown?" he asked the captain
after they had exchanged a few greetings and lit
up two of the older man's cigarettes.

"Just to the river," Ji replied. "Why, are you
looking to rip off some old grandmothers'
bicycles at Wulin Square?"

"As a matter of fact, no! I'm just starving is
what I am. Who's up for fatty pork on Fengqi
Road?" There was a moment of silence.

"I could eat... something," Splinter-of-Jade

agreed. "Preferably something that isn't chopped right off the side of a pig, but something."

Chapter Seven

The travelers encounter the fattiest fatty pork in the city; a lunch break to remember is had by all.

The barge gradually carried Rabbit, her beautiful new bicycle, the cricket champion, the Water Agent and his own vehicle, the old thief, and the captain out of the narrow water passages of the Northern neighborhoods of Hangzhou into the spacious, smooth flow of the Grand Canal. This famous waterway, constructed by hand in very ancient times, could be followed North for hundreds of miles all the way up to Beijing. Their craft was headed the other direction, however, to where the canal skirted the Northern and Eastern edges of the downtown district before terminating into the Qiantang River. Other barges, some empty and others low in the water with bags of cement and stacks of rebar, joined them as the banks rose on either side to become vertical concrete walls. Captain Ji continued swapping idle chatter with his two friends and smoking Master Ling's cigarettes all the way down, looking up only to turn a dogleg at the spot where the canal detoured around the heart of the city. Finally, just as Rabbit was beginning to nod off in the warmth of the morning sun, he instructed his passengers to retrieve their cycles and prepare to return to shore. Ninth Goldfish jumped down into the cargo hold and Ji tossed him the end of a chain, which he secured around the back of his tricycle. The captain flipped the switch on the boat's winch, lifting the heavy vehicle to the deck. The Water Agent then hefted Rabbit's new yellow bicycle by hand, passing it up to her. She checked Golden Wheel over to make sure her precious machine hadn't suffered a single scratch before she was satisfied. She couldn't wait to ride her again.

Captain Ji pulled the boat up alongside a loading platform in the shadow of an overpass,

cars and trucks rumbling overhead. The passengers disembarked and waved goodbye as he pulled away again towards midstream with sputtering propellers. "See you later, don't let your old tub rust right through and sink!" shouted Master Ling in farewell. "Don't let the stress of the job get to you!" Ninth Goldfish added. The barge joined its reddish-brown brethren in the middle of the Grand Canal and quickly became indistinguishable.

The four companions pushed their way up a series of loading ramps to street level. This was one of only a few occasions since she had joined the University on which Rabbit had visited the downtown commercial and business districts to the East of the West Lake. She wouldn't be caught dead visiting the nightclubs, and she couldn't afford to shop on the elite fashion streets around here even if she wanted to, so there wasn't much use in it. Everything she needed for the life of a student could be found on or around Yuquan Campus back up North. When she had been to the heart of town in the past, it had most often been on field trips for her architecture classes, studying and sketching famous Hangzhou landmarks of ultra-modern urban construction. It always freaked her out a little with its wide roads, shining skyscrapers and sharp, vertical angles, and this time was no exception. They had left the Grand Canal on one end of a long, noisy street that faded into the smog and distance. Rabbit held onto the handlebars of her bicycle tightly to combat a sudden feeling of vertigo.

"Now which way to the West Lake?" she asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"We're not there yet, there's a lot of big city to get through first," answered Master Ling with a note of pleased expectation in his voice.

"Does it *really* have to be *so* big?" she asked. "What do they do with it all?"

The Water Agent and the bicycle thief looked at each other and smiled knowingly.

"You may be a country bumpkin," Splinter-of-Jade replied from his perch on Golden Wheel's handlebars, "but you come from the mountains. What do they do with *those*?"

"Not a whole lot. Dangerous beasts and nasty creatures live in the mountains. It's nothing like this."

They pushed the two bikes down the sidewalk along the side of the road. The Water Agent climbed onto his seat to pedal slowly, but Rabbit didn't feel safe riding in these crazy and congested streets, no matter how much she wanted to sit astride Golden Wheel again. She stuck to pushing the bike through the light pedestrian traffic on the sidewalk. Master Ling led the way, chatting over the considerable traffic noise.

"I can just taste Madam Guan's fatty pork now. Her restaurant is just a little farther down the road, and it's well worth the walk. Definitely one of the finest dining establishments in Hangzhou, and quite possibly on the top ten list of Zhejiang Province. I gave her restaurant my highest personal ranking of five bicycle wheels, but she's yet to put my plaque up by the door."

"How does she do chestnuts?" Splinter-of-Jade asked.

"How do you want them? She could turn a single chestnut into a centerpiece for an Imperial banquet. I recommend the Naughty Chestnuts in Pungent Sauce."

"Wow," said the cricket champion, genuinely impressed. "I haven't seen Naughty Chestnuts since the fall of the Manchu government. The Guo Min Dang and the Commies banned them outright. I hope they're as filthy as I remember them."

"Even more so, I'm sure. Madam Guan's Naughty Chestnuts could make a barber-shop prostitute go blind. I would recommend against ordering the dish in present company, unless you eat them inside a bag."

Such idle conversation, which Rabbit chose to believe her companions were fabricating on the spot, carried them down the road between the ravine-like buildings until, looking over her shoulder, she couldn't see back to the bridge where they had started. The buildings, the street, and the shops along it grew ever more sparkling and expensive-looking as they progressed Southwards toward the heart of the city. At last they ramped up and over a footbridge at an intersection, worked their way slightly West down a road even wider than the last, and halted. They stood before the massive revolving doors of a tower sporting an elaborate neon facade--currently deactivated--over the first three floors of plate glass windows. The

sunburst design that accounted for most of the neon tubing read "Wood Mother Restaurant".

"Looking good today," Master Ling commented, licking his thin lips in anticipation. "I can smell all five primary flavors from right where I'm standing."

Ninth Goldfish didn't get down from his cycle. "I don't know, doesn't it look a little... upmarket?" He looked down at his well-worn blue municipal worker's uniform and his trash-collector's vehicle. Rabbit knew just how he felt; she still had only a single worthless *jiao* coin in her pocket. The cricket chirped forlornly. "I've had many keepers in my day who would have dined me on fine chestnuts and crab meat from restaurants such as this, but I have a feeling my current Immortal companion isn't one of them. No offence."

Master Ling rolled his eyes at his three long-faced friends. "Don't stand out in the street all day and miss out on the good tables. Do you think being the top Bicycle Charmer in our affluent city of Hangzhou is a paltry occupation? Don't assume I'm as poor as a University student or a trash-man. Come on in, I'll treat everyone to a round of fatty pork." The old thief straightened out his three long whiskers and took off his wool cap, and walked through the revolving door without waiting for any argument.

Rabbit and Ninth Goldfish locked up their cycles in front of the building and ventured into the building cautiously. The Wood Mother Restaurant was filling up quickly with the early lunch crowd, mostly wealthy families and businessmen wooing clients, along with a few dates. Master Ling greeted the waitress by name and she led them to a large table on the ground floor in front of the tall windows. Rabbit felt terribly out of place, but she was determined to enjoy the fine dining experience while she could. She picked up the long white chopsticks in front of her, then looked around and set them back on their porcelain holder self-consciously. Master Ling engaged in an extended whispered exchange with the waitress, who then nodded and glided away, traditional silk-brocade uniform swishing as she walked.

"Was that the Madam Guan you've been going on about?" Rabbit asked, trying to remember what lunchtime small-talk in a fancy restaurant

was supposed to sound like.

"Not likely. Madam Guan never, ever leaves the kitchens. We patrons never actually meet her in person, but we love her all the same." Master Ling pulled a Double Happiness brand cigarette out of the box in his jacket pocket and lit it from the gas-powered pot warmer in the middle of the table, tipping over the polished brass "No Smoking" sign at his elbow to use as a makeshift ashtray.

The CD of twangy Chinese classical music playing softly over the restaurant's speaker system was just starting to get on Rabbit's nerves when the food arrived, accompanied by a pot of perfumed green tea. The meal was composed of a bowl of white rice and three small ceramic pots containing what looked like large bean curd squares, along with another mysterious dish served inside a closed paper bag.

"Here you are," the waitress announced, "Three squares of Madam Guan's finest, with Sorrowful Rice, and an order of... "--she lowered her voice confidentially--"*Naughty* Chestnuts in Pungent Sauce. Careful, they're spicy."

"Great," Master Ling whispered back, rubbing his hands. "There will be a brand new red Flying Pigeon parked out front tomorrow evening. The key will be under the basket. Good choice--the new models this year are their best since '94."

The woman flashed a quick smile and walked off again, swishing.

"Good eating!" Master Ling wished the group. They just stared at him. "What?" he asked with a hurt expression on his wrinkled face. "Did you think I was going to lay down perfectly good cash for a meal at a place like this? A round of fatty pork at Mistress Guan's costs more than the black-market value of a 2004 Flying Pigeon, I guarantee you. The new models are worthless anyway, I wouldn't trust one with a ride through the park on a windy day."

The cricket chirped impatiently. "Forget it. The food is here, so let's enjoy it."

Rabbit picked up a single chopstick and poked the thing in front of her. It sunk in, making the cube wobble like a living thing. She watched the bicycle thief extract his from the pot expertly

and set it on top of a helping of the "Sorrowful Rice". Rabbit had eaten some pretty fatty pork in the mountains, but this dish was on a whole other level. The actual pork meat made up a dark brown layer accounting for the bottom sixth or so of the ten-centimeter-tall cube; the rest was composed of quaking milky white fat, with the thicker layer from just underneath the animal's skin riding precariously on top. It was exactly as Splinter-of-Jade had described it: a clean section cut out of the side of a pig, and an extraordinarily well-fed pig at that. Viscous gravy dribbled down the sheer sides and soaked into the rice below. The thief applauded.

"Looks... hearty," Rabbit commented. Ninth Goldfish attempted to remove his helping from its pot, but succeeded only in separating the rubbery layer of skin from the top. He shrugged and nibbled on the corner. Rabbit served herself some rice and tipped her pot upside-down on top of it, releasing the contents with a sloppy sucking noise. She pulled the meat off the bottom and tasted it. The flavor was permeated with pig-grease that slid down her throat. She was reminded of her grandmother back in Suichang, and her stories of hard days during the Great Famine. As a little girl, Rabbit had always found it odd the way her grandmother would suck and chew loudly on chunks of inedible fat at meals even when there was plenty of meat to go around. The old lady had always told her that fat was the finest substance in the world, and it was a crime to throw it to a dog--unless you were fattening up the dog for later. Rabbit had never quite understood her sense of humor in those days. Now she smiled and pulled off a thick white slab with her chopsticks, leaning in close to stuff the quivering mass in her mouth. It tasted like warm butter, and was surprisingly yielding; it practically melted away and slid down her throat before she realized it, leaving a pleasantly thick residue behind in her mouth. She smiled to Master Ling, grease sliding down her teeth in sheets.

Meanwhile, Splinter-of-Jade was struggling to tear his way into the paper bag of *Naughty* Chestnuts in Pungent Sauce with his sharp jaws. He finally wriggled through and disappeared inside. At once, the sack began to emit hysterical chirping laughter. "That's awful!

'Terrible!' he shouted between outbursts. Master Ling paused from attacking his fatty pork to laugh along. "Tell me about it, aha ha! Bet you don't see little children snacking on chestnuts like *that* down by the lake on a Sunday morning!"

The chirping inside the bag subsided for a moment, then started up again even louder than before. Patrons at nearby tables leaned over to see what the noise was all about. "Ah-chrrp, ha! They taste even worse than they look! Chrrp-haa!" The bag started to hop around on the table as the cricket champion struggled to contain his fit of hysterics. Rabbit snatched for it as it bounced closer to the edge, but too late--the parcel took one last mighty bound and fell to the floor, tearing open and sending chestnuts rolling all over the floor. A woman at the next table over screamed and fainted, her chair crashing over backwards. Ninth Goldfish reacted fast, grabbing Rabbit's arm and pulling her upright before she could see what all the fuss was about. "Let's go!" he ordered in her ear, and started heading after Master Ling, who was already halfway across the dining hall acting as if nothing was happening. More screams and shouts erupted behind them, blocking their retreat to the main exit. They made a beeline for a back passageway instead. Splinter-of-Jade landed on her shoulder as they caught up with the bicycle thief, still giggling madly. Rabbit clamped her hand over him until he fell silent. The passageway they disappeared down led to a tight spiral staircase, which carried them up to a half-open door with the character for wealth taped on the outside. Master Ling pushed his way in and stopped. Through the door they saw a private dining room, decorated with elaborate watercolors of cranes and herons. Inside three men in black jackets sat around a green gaming table scattered with *majiang* tiles and neat piles of money, smoke curling around their heads. The men scrutinized the intruders with piercing eyes.

"Are you here to play a game, or not? If you are, welcome in."

"Sure," Master Ling answered, stroking his three whiskers nervously. "Who doesn't love to play?"

Chapter Eight

A Great Wall rises between the Seeker of Numbers and her goal; it is learned that those who woo the God of Money too successfully risk being taken as his concubine.

Rabbit couldn't understand the old bicycle thief's nervousness at first--she thought he, of all people, would jump at any chance to waste more of their day playing a game. His roundabout manner soon made it apparent, however, that he didn't know *how* to play this particular pastime. He was struggling to keep the three men at the table occupied for as long as possible without actually starting the game.

"Ah, good old 'shove', game of emperors," he waxed poetic. "The sweet clatter of the tiles brings to mind the grand days of my youth, playing for coppers in the wine shop over a bottle of warm rice wine, good friends and good money all around..."

"So let's get to it!" the tallest man, a well-dressed brute with a scar over one eyebrow, interrupted.

"But don't you see," Master Ling struggled to continue, "*Majiang* is just a bunch of plastic tiles without some liquid accompaniment! We'll go grab some drinks, and be right back by the time you've finished the current...um...thing."

The man on the left, with short-cropped hair and eyes like black diamonds, laughed humorlessly and lifted up a plastic cooler at his feet, pulling out a cold bottle of Future Cola and tossing it to the thief. "Drinks are right here. Sit down, *majiang* with only three players is like a car with three wheels. Come balance out the table."

Rabbit could see that the hapless Master Ling wasn't going to get out of it, not after digging himself in as deep as he had. She looked at Ninth Goldfish, but the Agent responded with a don't-look-at-me shrug. Her cricket companion had already secreted himself under her collar. She sighed, knowing right where matters were

headed.

"I could start us off," she piped up. "Grandpa here talks big, but I beat him all the time. He's always knocking over his tiles." She did know how to play, but just barely. She had only ever played with her mother and grandmother during the Spring Festival--they would always let her win--and she hadn't even been home for that since coming to the University. She took the empty seat at the table without waiting for an invitation, remembering again what the cricket had said about her Immortal-esque lack of self-preservation.

"Fine," answered the surprised tall man. "You're West Wind. Put down a bet and we'll shove another round."

Her spontaneous plan was already taking a distinct turn for the worse, she realized. She'd forgotten all about the sizeable stacks of one hundred *yuan* notes resting lightly on the edges of the table. She fished in her pocket, and to her horror found only the single one-*jiao* coin she had known was there since this morning. She smiled what she hoped was a mysterious smile and slapped it down on the green felt surface of the table. Her three opponents coughed in synchronized surprise.

"One *jiao*?"

"What's this all about, little girl?"

"Don't play around with us."

Calmly she made something up. "That, my friends, is all I need. Any halfway-lucky grandmother can win some cash if she starts with a fortune to build on. I'll clean you all out from the bottom up."

The heavyset, chain-smoking man to her right laughed loudly. "I like your spirit. Let's see if you can build a winning hand as well as you can boast."

Behind her, Ninth Goldfish and Master Ling took seats against the wall and opened the offered bottles of Future Cola. The four players went through the shuffling of tiles and built their four walls in the middle of the table. Rabbit had trouble keeping up even at the setup, which didn't bode well for the game ahead. The tall man offered her the pair of dice to roll. She came up with a double six. The men grabbed their starting hands and set them up in rows rapidly. Rabbit tried to retain her confident look and not knock over any tiles.

The smoke was making her nose itch. It was her turn to go first; she threw out a flower tile. Three more tiles hit the center of the table in rapid-fire sequence and it was her turn again before she'd even realized it. She drew a new tile and discarded a three *tiao*. Only then did she look at the new tile in her hand, fighting back a sneeze. It was the character Middle. Shit, she thought, should have thrown it out first. Then she remembered to check her hand: she already had East, South, West and North! The Middle tile completed the very difficult series. She was admiring her luck when someone poked her--it was her turn again already. She drew a *fa* character, which she already had two of. Even better. The heavyset man played a one *tong* piece. "*Peng!*" a voice whispered from under her collar. She sat up with a start, holding up a finger. "*Peng!*" she exclaimed, and grabbed her own pair of one-*tong* tiles, smacking them down next to the first. She sat back again with a hopeful smile, heart racing. "*Majiang!*" the cricket under her collar whispered again urgently. "*Majiang!*" he hissed louder. "What? Oh, *majiang!*" Rabbit shouted, tipping over her wall for the others to see. The three men leaned in and whistled.

"East-South-West-North-Middle, three *fa*, and a pair of nine *wan!*"

"So quickly?"

"It can't be!"

Rabbit's head was spinning. She watched three hundred-*yuan* bills appear on top of her lonely *jiao* coin. Before she could absorb this fact, the walls were demolished and the shuffle began again.

The second round hardly lasted longer than the first; Rabbit was in possession of a priceless winning hand, a complete series of 1-9 *tiao* tiles and a Money-God piece, before she even started to think about what she was doing. Her stack of pink bills rose by another nine bank-notes.

"That's just not natural!"

"That wasn't even a full round. Who's dealing her all the winning tiles?"

"Nobody can cheat that well!"

The short man handed her a Future Cola from the cooler under the table. She needed it; her mouth was dry with fear, surprise and suspense. Immediately the next round of wall-building

began. This time she drew thirteen completely unrelated tiles. It looked like her run of luck was finished. When it was her first turn, she came up with a four-*wan*: the God of Money piece for this round. Not that it would help her any. She scanned her row rapidly for something to throw out, but everything was equally useless.

"*Majiang*!" Splinter-of-Jade whispered again. She ran her eyes up and down the tiles in confusion. What was the cricket talking about? "*Majiang*! Just do it!" She knocked her wall down face-up and shrugged with her head bowed, wondering if any of the three men were armed. There was a moment of silence.

"Fourteen Strangers!" gasped the fat man. "Utterly impossible!"

"Huh? I don't see a single pair or series!" said the confused short man. The tall man hit him over the head with a half-empty Future Cola bottle.

"That's why they call it 'Fourteen Strangers,' monkey-face. Thirteen completely unique tiles, totally unrelated, along with a God of Money. It's the most difficult hand a player can build, worth ten times the base wager." He locked his hands behind his head and leaned back. "She's just cleaned us out, men."

The fat man set his cigarette down in his silver ash-tray and moved every scrap of money on the table into Rabbit's pile. She lifted her eyes again.

"A master of the game at your age! Your grandpa must be one heck of a teacher," the tall man whistled. "How about showing us a trick or two yourself, old man, just for fun? We don't have any money left to play with thanks to your grand-daughter, but we'd like to see what you've got."

Rabbit cut in again to keep the focus off the hapless Master Ling. "My grandfather didn't teach me much of anything, actually. I just get lucky sometimes."

"I knew it!" blurted out the short man excitedly. "No amount of skill could finish off three rounds so fast. She's got the lucky hand *qi*!"

The three hardened faces displayed expressions of outright reverence. "You're right, and it's got to be some of the most powerful I've ever seen. Here, throw these." The tall man tossed the pair of plastic dice in front of Rabbit. She picked them up, shook her hands together gingerly,

and dropped the pair in the middle of the table. Double sixes, again. A chill ran up her spine. Was this all being staged somehow? Why hadn't she ever noticed her hand-*qi* before, if it was so extraordinary? She'd only ever played this game with her mother and grandma during the Spring Festival, and they had always let her win... or had they?

"How did you get that?" demanded the fat man with a burst of cigarette smoke, an undertone of menace creeping back into his voice. "Did you visit a shrine, or something? Some kind of talisman? *Tai ji* practices?"

"I don't know!" she admitted, voice quaking.

"I'm just lucky!"

The three men looked at each other and nodded.

"Take your winnings. We've got someone you should meet."

The fat man turned around. "We're going to borrow your grand-daughter for a little while," he said to Master Ling. "Our boss is very interested in unusual happenings such as this, and we think a meeting would be enjoyable for all concerned. We think you'll agree that a courtesy visit is the least we deserve from your grand-daughter in return for the substantial winnings she's taken from us."

The poor thief just shrugged. "Whatever you wish. I wouldn't be so sure about her fancy hand-*qi*, though, if the way she lets bicycles slip through her fingers is any indication."

The tall man walked around the gaming table and set a hand on Rabbit's shoulder. Instantly, he jerked it back with a shout of pain. "Yowwow, What was that?" Splinter-of-Jade launched himself from Rabbit's shirt at the man, throwing her back into the chair with the recoil. The arthropodic missile met the man with a kick to the face that sent him sprawling. The two others leapt to their feet. "What on Earth was that?"

Releasing a barrage of battle chirps, the Immortal fighter sprang at the fat man like a bullet. He ducked behind the table in fright as the cricket buzzed past. "It's mad! It's mad! Someone open the door and let it out!"

The short man grabbed for a handful of *majiang* tiles and started hurling them one by one at Splinter-of-Jade, who had embedded himself in a dent in the middle of a torn watercolor

hanging with the force of his charge. The cricket returned a tile with a mighty kick of his smooth black legs; it bounced off the man's head with a painful-sounding crack. He pulled his head free of the wall and pounced back for the third time. He was already hurtling through midair before he saw the tall man sit up with the drinks cooler, spilling some of the cola bottles and ice on the floor. His foe held the container out at arm's length and caught the insect in mid-jump, slamming the lid closed. The cooler shook with a rapid-fire series of bumping noises, then gradually fell silent. The tall man closed the latch on the lid and sat on it. He rubbed his forehead, breathing heavily.

"Insect pests are getting bad these days. Fine, our boss will be just as interested to see *this* oddity, too. Wonders never cease."

Chapter Nine

The Empress of the Future reigns high above the city; for luck without end, the Seeker of Numbers is imprisoned in the tower.

Neither Master Ling nor Ninth Goldfish dared make a move. They sat on their cushioned bench in the game room miserably as the three dangerous men escorted Rabbit and her cricket friend out.

"Feel free to stay here and have a few drinks," the short man offered with a thinly-veiled edge of mockery. "There's a chess set in the end-table. We'll be back later on." The bicycle thief waved a limp hand dismissively.

Rabbit was led--almost frog-marched--down the spiral staircase. The tall man led the way, holding the cooler under his arm tightly. They cut straight through the middle of the crowded, merrily noisy dining hall, not eliciting a single glance from the wait staff or customers. Rabbit spotted the cheerful waitress with whom Master Ling had made his deal for the fatty pork, but she was making an especially strong commitment to ignoring the dark-jacketed gang's activities. There was no way Rabbit was going to get any help from her without simply yelling "Help!" out loud, and even then it was

debatable. The fat man, who was keeping a deceptively light grip on her shoulder, noticed the terrified look on her face and tried unsuccessfully to appease her.

"Hey now, don't look like we're going to send you off to the re-education camps. We just think our boss would like to play a game of majiang with you, and have a look at your bug too while you're there. Our boss, you see, is a big fan of weird things. You'll like the office, there's a lot of cool stuff in there."

They passed out of the wide revolving door, and guided their "guest" to an expensive black car with very dark tinted windows--the type of car other drivers went to great lengths to avoid cutting off at every intersection in the city. They offered her a place in the back seat with the fat man; the tall man took the driver's seat. He pulled out into midday traffic and took off in a direction Rabbit couldn't identify. The buildings looked the same on every side as far as she could tell.

After turning a few corners and confusing Rabbit so much in the process that she lost any hope of ever finding her way back to the Wood Mother Restaurant, the black car came to a stop in front of a particularly monolithic tower somewhere in the depths of the downtown commercial district. None of the dark-jacketed men had talked on the drive--the fat man had just lit another cigarette and filled the expensive interior of the car with smoke--and they remained silent as they all stepped out. The short one opened Rabbit's door for her and gestured for her to come out. She climbed out onto the curb and was met by a giant, tree-sized fiberglass bottle of Future Cola. The sculpture stood, supported at an angle by iron beams like a missile ready for launch, in the square at the entrance to the tower. The trademark slogan on the label, "The Future Will Be Better!", was increased along with the rest of the bottle to the size of a billboard tagline. It struck her as highly inappropriate to her situation. The plinth of the statue was marked with the logo of Wahaha, the makers of Future Cola and other soft drink brands.

"What is this, the Future Cola factory or something?" she asked her hosts, incredulous. The three men chuckled, lifting their eyes as one towards the upper reaches of the building.

"No," the tall one answered, "the nearest F-C factory is way out in the rice paddies up North. This, my dear, is the corporate headquarters of the Wahaha Company Limited, nationally renowned manufacturer of soft drinks, mineral water, fruit juices, bottled tea, and packaged nuts, and manager of entertainment venues and restaurants here in our fair city of Hangzhou. My friends and I are top management at this fine organization." He sneered and spat on the plinth of the statue. "Why else did you think we would be sitting around drinking Future Cola in the gaming room? Because we enjoy the taste of shit and corn syrup? *Yee-uch*."

They resumed leading her along, into the building and up a series of escalators. The headquarters doubled as an entertainment center of sorts: the ground floor housed a small group of clothing, mobile phone and snack shops, and above that was a movie theater showing some popular American film. The escalators ended outside a set of polished wooden doors under a brass sign reading "The Wahaha Club". The impressive portal was opened for them by a tall, stylish woman dressed in red silk--a rather risqué modern interpretation of a traditional waitress's outfit.

"Hello, Mr. Chin. Come in. Would you like a karaoke room prepared for you?" she asked in a professional singsong voice.

"No, no," the tall man said, a little embarrassed, "We're headed upstairs." He shooed the woman away.

"Of course," she smiled, and drifted away. "The boss is in this afternoon, go on up."

Rabbit followed the men through the depths of the luxurious club. It was empty, of course, and eerily quiet at this time of the afternoon, so she could only imagine what it must be like when the wealthiest socialites in Hangzhou congregated here late at night to throw their money around. By no means had she herself ever been to such a place. The dark red, softly-lit hallways were decorated with overflowing vases of flowers in alcoves and surreal paintings of European mythological themes on the walls. The molded ceilings were covered in cherub-packed frescoes. At what must have been somewhere near the back of the club, between a dance floor on one side and a bar on the other, the tall man--Mr. Chin--pulled open a hidden

door that looked like a full-sized mural of a Grecian warrior. The shiny steel doors of an elevator slid open behind the painting. They rode upwards in the flower-filled compartment for an extraordinarily long time. "The CEO's office is at the very top of the Wahaha Tower", explained Mr. Chin, "but our boss likes to be able to come down and mingle at the club in the evenings. Thus the express elevator."

The car finally slowed to a smooth stop, and they emerged into a high-ceilinged suite at the top of the spire. Full-length windows on three walls offered a view over the whole downtown area glittering under a crystal-clear afternoon sky, with the halcyon West Lake beyond a band of greenery reflecting the perfect shade of blue. The room itself featured an immaculately-polished marble floor, many more flowers, and a ten-foot porcelain vase expertly glazed to look like a second giant bottle of Future Cola. Beyond this, there were only a few pieces of furniture in the room--including, to Rabbit's dismay, a *majiang* table of black lacquered wood. "Who's paying a visit?" sang out a female voice from one of the side doorways behind the elevator. Rabbit was startled to hear it; was the CEO of Wahaha a woman? Whoever heard of such a thing?

"Just your three loyal servants, Madam," Mr. Chin called back. "We have someone for you to meet, and something to show you."

"Good afternoon!" the voice, suddenly much more masculine, greeted them as the CEO walked into the room. Rabbit tried to keep her eyebrows down, but couldn't stop them from rising. The boss was a man after all, with a heavy, very un-feminine build and even a bit of facial hair, but he was dressed in a flowing, old-fashioned woman's robe of scarlet silk, embroidered in gold with elaborate floral designs. He wore heavy makeup around his eyes, and had his long hair tied back in a traditional bun with a wooden comb sticking out. Jade and gold jewelry swung all over his body with clacking sounds.

"Who's this?" the man asked in a voice almost as booming as Splinter-of-Jade's, leaning down a bit to study Rabbit's surprised expression.

"I'm Rabbit," Rabbit answered before her hosts could beat her to it. "And you?"

"You mean you haven't heard of Madam

Guan?" he asked, rising back up in what looked like genuine surprise. "I am one and the same."

"I thought Madam Guan just cooked good fatty pork," Rabbit responded, getting just the sort of reaction she had hoped for.

"By no means! Madam Guan has many other talents far beyond the kitchen. You must have heard this rumor--which I won't dispute the veracity of--at the Wood Mother Restaurant, which my Wahaha owns and operates. I introduced that family recipe there years ago, and I swear I'll never hear the end of it. Sometimes I think I'm better known in some circles in this town for that damned pork than any of my legendary business accomplishments." He slapped his knee, jewelry clacking, and looked to his underlings.

"Now why is this young woman in my inner sanctum?" he asked testily. "Has Future Cola become so popular amongst the younger generation that we're now giving guided tours?" The three managers bowed. Mr. Chin spoke for them. "We are sorry if we have disturbed you at an inopportune time, Madam, but we happened to meet with this singular young lady at the Wood Mother and discovered that she has a truly miraculous ability with the game of *majiang*. We believe she may be in possession of a supernaturally large amount of lucky hand-*qi*, for reasons we have yet to establish. We thought you might be interested. Oh..." he pointed to the cooler in the short man's hands, and the significant purple bruise on his own forehead. "She was also in possession of one hell of a fighting cricket."

Madam Guan shrugged. "Cricket fighting is barbaric. Squash that poor thing and get rid of it. But hand-*qi*... Hand-*qi* I can always use." He walked over to the black *majiang* table and pulled up some chairs. "Come on, Miss Rabbit, let's play a friendly round or two. I'm no lightweight in the *qi* department myself, in spite of all my *yin*." He laughed at his own joke, but none of the others dared to.

The table's surface was of real velvet, and the tiles were carved from solid blocks of jade. Madam Guan divided up a stack of ancient square-holed *banliang* coins that looked like they had been taken from a museum to be used as betting chips. Rabbit sat opposite the extravagant man and started building her wall

with little enthusiasm. The short and fat man hurried to build the other two, but broke them in the middle to look like abandoned fortifications, indicating that this was to be a one-on-one match only. Madam Guan rolled a five and a four, and the round began. Rabbit had a winning hand right from the start; it only took her three turns to discard her extra pieces. She tipped her hand over, feeling strangely embarrassed.

"Well played!" the Wahaha boss exclaimed, clapping. He immediately demolished the remaining walls with a sweep of his hand and shuffled for the next round. This time, Rabbit rolled double sixes for the third time that day. That was starting to freak her out more than a little. They played on regardless, all the way up to the second turn, when she achieved a *majiang* with all three available Money God tiles. Her opponent didn't even bother with counting out her winnings from his stack of bronze coins; he just knocked the walls down and started again, a preoccupied expression on his carefully made-up face. In the third round, she kept going up to her fourth turn, but finally won with all four seasons, all four flowers, and all five directions. Madam Guan smashed a fist down on the lacquered corner of the table and shuffled the tiles again with shaking hands. They hastily built new walls and Rabbit rolled the dice again, willing them with all her heart to provide a low number. They came up double sixes once more. The man stood instantly, rocking the gaming table and tipping his chair noisily to the floor.

"Enough!" he bellowed. "This is beyond belief! How do you do it?"

"Like I keep telling everyone, I don't know! I don't even like *majiang*! It's boring!"

He considered the issue for a moment, absorbed in his own schemes. "Do you have any formal training in business and economics?" he asked, to her confusion.

"Well no, I mean... I'm just an architecture major at Zhe Da."

He thought a few seconds longer, eyes flicking over to the majestic view from the window and back at Rabbit.

"No matter. You'll learn."

She didn't like where this was going at all. She attempted to leap to her feet with even more force than Madam Guan had employed, sending

the *majiang* table crashing to one side and a cascade of jade tiles bouncing and sliding across the polished marble floor, where they ricocheted off the glass of the floor-length window. "What's that supposed to mean, you freak? You want to train me to be one of your creepy soda-pop managers or something?"

"Not at all," the CEO explained, picking at a long painted nail. Her three captors in black jackets moved closer behind her until she turned and growled at them. "These fine gentlemen are highly trained specialists in business administration," he continued. "It takes some serious brains and a ruthless personality to do their jobs. But business is never all about skill, or we would have taken over a hundred percent of the market by now. There's always a heaping serving of luck involved. That's why I need someone with your hand-*qi* around, for the really risky decisions like picking stocks on the market to invest our capital in and choosing between new products from R&D. Shit, you can pull numbers out of a bag to write our budget for all I care. With your hands, we can't go wrong. Coke is *history*." The CEO turned on his high heel and stalked back out the rear passage, the tail of his dress dragging a few *majiang* tiles across the floor. "Don't worry, I'll make sure my people prepare suitably luxurious living quarters for you. Worlds apart from anything you're used to back at the University, I'm sure. I'll be by this evening to talk about some tech stocks I've had my eye on."

The three men in black jackets closed in around Rabbit, grinning. "Lucky girl," said the short one, "Madam likes you." She was trapped against the window with the city stretching at her back. She tried to look behind the men and spot the red plastic cooler, but Splinter-of-Jade was already gone.

Chapter Ten

The Immortal Cricket mounts a rescue; the Cola Wars claim another victim.

Feeling soaked back into Splinter-of-Jade's six limbs and two antennae, as the myriad swarming dots of his compound vision arranged themselves into a cohesive vista of an upside-down city skyline. He flipped himself over and spread out on the warm concrete, soaking up the mid-day sun and attempting to gain some sort of bearings. He was lying on the dusty edge of a narrow window-sill very high above downtown Hangzhou. Consciousness is a valuable thing, he told himself. Lose it, and you never know where you might end up. He shouted out an angry, pained chirp as his mighty hind leg muscles thawed. He might be an Immortal cricket the equal of which the world had never known, but he was still a cricket, and arthropods of his species didn't do well with cold. A freezing cooler full of ice water wasn't the sort of place he was designed to operate in. Now, after blacking out in the all-consuming cold, he had somehow wound up on the top of a skyscraper. He turned, flexing his joints, and peered inside the window. A luxurious bathroom, all brass and spotless porcelain. This must be the penthouse home of whomever Rabbit had been brought to. Those goons had really been working for someone big. The cricket champion tested his jumping legs, then leaped to the cracked-open vent at the top of the window. The rubber molding held a puddle of water. Their captors must have thought he was frozen to death, he realized, and dumped the cooler out the window. These warm-blooded humans, with the exception of a handful of the very greatest cricket trainers Splinter-of-Jade had known, just didn't understand insect physiology at all.

He hopped inside to the marble floor--just what he needed, another freezing surface!--and crawled under the closed door. The long hallway outside was of equal decadence, but mercifully carpeted. On the right it led into a

brightly-lit room with tall windows, and on the left it continued around a corner. He chose to follow it into the depths. Around the bend were a series of closed doors on either side. He crawled under the first; it was a shrine to Tai Shen, the God of Money, lit dimly by candles. Splinter-of-Jade couldn't count how many of *those* he had seen over the centuries in the households of his wealthy owners. He returned to the hallway and tried the next one. A gallery of sorts, with spot-lit, glass-covered artifact cases the cricket couldn't see into from the floor. The walls were hung with undoubtedly priceless paintings of beautiful concubines, each one bearing a constellation of collector's stamps. He moved on. The next room was larger than Splinter-of-Jade's last trainer's entire flat in Green Garden Towers, but to his surprise, it was just one big closet filled with fine, traditional women's clothing. So the big guy had a live-in wife, the cricket thought. That might bode well for Rabbit. Not that he had seriously considered anyone having designs on the honor of the homely young woman, mind. Even he, an insect, could see that Rabbit didn't possess any of the classical beauty that male humans got so hot and bothered over. Of course, that could be a distinct advantage in some situations--for instance, the one at hand. It was just one more intriguing conundrum about her, that an Immortal could be so downright ugly. He left the cavernous closet behind and continued the search for his strange young friend.

The next door was sealed around the edges; Splinter-of-Jade had to chew and squirm his way through the rubber lining at the bottom. He discovered the reason why the instant he made it to the other side: the room beyond smelled strongly and unmistakably of pig shit. It was cold, and completely dark, but a faint spot of orange light on the wall indicated the location of the light switch. He jumped precisely and kicked the switch on. The room was not tiled or carpeted, it had a bare concrete floor and empty walls. A gargantuan beast of a pig the size of a large water buffalo lay against the far wall on a bed of clean straw, its grotesque folds of fat completely covering its legs. Splinter-of-Jade's tiny stomach turned. The pig had a square two feet wide cut clean

out of the blubber on its side; he could see the bare muscle rippling in the hole under a thin layer of milky new growth. The beast grunted in its sleep, its flab quaking sickeningly. "Yee-uch!" he exclaimed involuntarily, and squirmed his way back under the door in horror. He'd never known just how true it was: humans really would eat anything. He thanked the heavens he hadn't partaken in the fatty pork meal at the Wood Mother Restaurant. He was happy to stick with chestnuts from now on. He briefly considered letting the great pitiful animal free to cause some havoc, but then he thought of the effect the sight would have on Rabbit, who *had* joined in the meal with gusto. Some things were better left locked up.

He was approaching the next door when he heard Rabbit's muffled voice from inside.

"Crazy cross-dressing bastard! You can't just keep me locked up here like the Emperor of Qin. There are such things as laws in this day and age! Wait till my cricket finds you!" The door shook on its frame as she pounded from the other side. Splinter-of-Jade slipped under, delighted. The room was about the size of the pig's, but elaborately decorated and filled with well-cushioned furniture. Printed sheets of paper had been strewn all over the Persian carpet.

"No kidding!" he answered her from between her feet. She looked down, expression shifting from rage to excited joy over the course of a few long seconds.

"You're not squished!" she whispered loudly.

"Squished? Impossible," he laughed. "The five sacred mountains couldn't squish me if they all teamed up."

She clapped noiselessly. "So we're leaving?"

"Right away."

"And you're going to kick Madam Guan's ass?"

His antennae rose in surprise. "Madam Guan, of the fatty pork? She's the one who's keeping you here?" He thought of the enormous closet of dresses and of the hideous pig, and it all made sense.

"He. He's the boss of the Wahaha Company, the people who make the soft drinks."

It ceased to make sense. Ah, for those fleeting moments of sanity, he thought to himself.

"Anyway, whoever this person is, ass will be kicked. Now, allow me." Rabbit jumped back

and he smashed the locked door open with three flying attacks. He hopped down the hall with his friend right behind him.

They turned the corner and exited into the sunny open lounge with the semi-circle of glass walls. A huge man in flowery silk robes and makeup was leaning over a black majiang table, intently running his palms over a neat stack of jade tiles. He looked up at Rabbit and scowled.

"Oh, don't tell me..."

He ducked with an uncanny reflex as Splinter-of-Jade sprang across the room for his head. The cricket rocketed past his bun of hair and smacked into the window behind, causing a tiny crack to form in the reinforced glass. Madam Guan jumped to his feet and spun around, knocking over the table as he whipped a steel fan out of his belt and unfurled it with a flick of his wrist to reveal a serrated razor-edge.

"How predictable," the cricket fighter laughed. His adversary grabbed the fallen table with his free hand and hurled it at the insect where he had fallen to the floor. The lacquered piece of furniture smashed to pieces. Splinter-of-Jade attacked again, but was smacked away by a sweep of the metal fan.

"Come on, bug! Are you just going to jump around like a grasshopper? I thought you were supposed to be a good fighter," bellowed the man, striking a frightening pose.

"And I thought you were supposed to be a woman," Splinter-of-Jade retorted. "You call that graceful, the way you flail that fan around like a newspaper?"

He launched himself at the man's feet, but Madam Guan jumped clear off the ground, robe billowing, and swung her fan low. The cricket ricocheted across the polished stone floor into a pile of fallen majiang tiles.

"Hey Rabbit," he called out. "This could take a little while to finish off properly. How do you feel about jumping out the window again, and I'll catch up with you later after I beat this oaf to a pulp?"

"I'm against it," she replied from the entrance to the hallway across the room.

"Thought so," he said, then hopped into a fighting stance again as his enemy charged. He kicked a few jade tiles into the path of the robed juggernaut, which worked surprisingly well. The man stepped on a four-*tiao* tile and his feet went

out from under him. He fell right on top of Splinter-of-Jade, shaking the room. The cricket kicked upwards and sent the man into the air, from where he crash-landed on a hapless chair.

"See?" the cricket begged Rabbit. "I can't be squished, and neither can you. Didn't your insane hand-*qi* convince you that you're an Immortal?"

"I may need a little more proof before I'm ready to jump off the top of the Wahaha building," she called back.

"Fine, take the rotten elevator."

Rabbit made a break for it. Madam Guan turned to look. Splinter-of-Jade saw that the spot where the CEO had landed was right next to the ten-foot vase painted like a Future Cola bottle. He jumped, kicking off the window and slamming his little head into the back of the huge porcelain ornament. It toppled onto his enemy with a monumental crash that shook the windows all around the room. Shards of brown- and red-glazed pottery spread out to cover the floor like the starburst of a firework, carrying the cricket with them to the opposite wall. Madam Guan rose up from under the heap with a deep, resonant growl. He rushed to the elevator, shedding pottery from every fold of his robe, but the metal doors had already shut. He stabbed at the button maniacally until Splinter-of-Jade's iron tarsi connected with the back of his head, smacking his face into the wall savagely. He whirled around with a bloody nose, swinging his fan high.

"Graaargh! Quit that, you annoying pest!"

The tiny fighter took off again, and was whacked away with the fan. He slid across the floor, tarsi scrabbling for a hold. The instant he gained some purchase, he was in the air again, kicking off the ceiling right above his opponent's head and coming in from the unprotected top. Madam Guan ducked low and swung again. They exchanged a few more frenzied blows before the elevator completed its round and returned to the penthouse, empty. The CEO ducked a final assault from the cricket and rushed into the compartment. Perfect. Splinter-of-Jade started to follow as the doors were sliding shut, but cut his last hop short so that he landed right in-between the two sets of closing doors. The dawning shock on Madam Guan's face visible the instant before he disappeared behind the shutters told Splinter-

of-Jade that the man knew what he had in mind. The elevator jerked and started to descend, while he wasted no time setting to work on the main cable.

Down below in the Wahaha Club a few moments later, Rabbit flinched in her hiding place behind the bar as the building shook to its foundations. She slowly peeked over the counter to the elevator visible at the end of the hallway. The doors were bowed outwards like crushed cardboard. Splinter-of-Jade tumbled out of the crack in the middle and rolled across the carpet.

"Oooh, my aching mandibles. Never again," he moaned. Rabbit hopped over the bar, grabbed a bottle at random, and ran out, beaming.

"You rock! Have a drink to celebrate?"

"I don't think so. How about some Sichuanese food to numb all feeling in my mouth?"

"Maybe later," she answered, voice suddenly shaking. He looked down the hallway with her. Six women, dressed in the skimpy silk uniforms of Wahaha Club wait staff, froze at the other end in perfect Shaolin battle formation.

"No problem," he groaned, "Just keep running." He threw himself into the fray with a resounding battle chirp. Rabbit hurled the bottle of whiskey she had picked up at a fashionably-styled head and dashed past the brawl down the passage. The killer waitresses were well-trained in the arts of *gong fu*, but they didn't know how to deal with Splinter-of-Jade. He ricocheted around the confined space like a vicious ping-pong ball, cracking into heads and ribs in a frenzy. The fighters finally broke formation and disappeared into the depths of the club silently, fleeing down dark side passages like shadows. The victorious cricket performed a hoppy little dance in the empty, scarred hallway and took off after his friend.

"See? That's what you keep Old Cricket around for! Ahrrr!"

Chapter Eleven

On the road again, our heroes reach the West Lake; captivated by Heavenly beauty, they are unable to leave the shores of harmony.

Rabbit ran out the front entrance of the Wahaha Building, skidding to a halt beside the giant fiberglass Future Cola bottle. Splinter-of-Jade clung to her shoulder, antennae raised high, every millimeter the Champion of the Cricket Ring. Rabbit pointed and gasped for breath.

"Is that who I think it is?"

On the corner of the street outside, Master Ling sat across a makeshift chess board from one of the building security guards, tugging on his three whiskers. Ninth Goldfish was behind him, leaning thoughtfully on his garbage collector's tricycle. And there, propped against the fence--

"Thank Heaven, you're safe!" She sprinted across the small plaza and embraced Golden Wheel, stroking the bicycle's seat and rims. "How did you find me again?"

Master Ling coughed. "The bike is with us. Remember, your devoted companions?"

She blinked at him. "Wait, didn't I lock it up to the fence in front of the Wood Mother Restaurant with a big chain?"

The old man just rolled his eyes and returned to the chess game. "Thick, I tell you," he said to the security guard. "It's got to be all those television serials and cartoons." The man shrugged in agreement and moved a piece. The bicycle thief took it without a moment's hesitation.

"So," Ninth Goldfish asked, "do we need to be in a hurry here?"

"Just a bit," answered Splinter-of-Jade. "You must have heard the crash out here. There are some angry wait staff."

The Water Agent climbed on the seat of his cycle. "Good, let's make a move then. Break it up, old man."

Master Ling made a sound of protest. The security guard moved a piece slowly, and the thief took it again. "Checkmate. Keep

practicing, boy, and maybe when you're my age you'll be ready to play for real." The guard shrugged again and walked back to the building, pulling out the radio from his belt that had been bleeping urgently the whole time. Master Ling rose, slapping his knees.

"Finished. Let's go."

Sitting on Golden Wheel again, Rabbit felt like, all in all, the whole day had really not been going all *that* badly so far. The yellow bicycle had a way of making her feel like that; she imagined she'd probably view things the same way even if she was riding the bike in her own funeral procession. They mounted up and turned towards the road.

"West Lake?" suggested the Water Agent.

"Yes, please," Rabbit responded heartily. "Let's get out of the city as soon as possible. No more snack stops."

"Aww," complained Master Ling from his perch on the garbage bin as they rode off, "but Big Horse Mouth's House of Stinky Tofu is right down the street."

"Very funny."

"No, really," he said seriously, "it's not to be missed. his stinky tofu is so smelly it once killed a cat that wandered into the restaurant. He has to hire an old lady with a stick to keep the crows from congregating outside. They say it's the second stinkiest tofu in the city..." the volume of his voice fell so that she could barely make out the words over the traffic. "...But nobody knows where the stinkiest of all can be found anymore, so I guess you could say Big Horse Mouth's is on top now. Still, I've heard stories."

Rabbit was already starting to get annoyed with the old man again, but she was still just glad to be back with her strange friends and out of the building behind her. They made rapid progress towards the lake while she tried to steer the conversation away from disturbing local cuisine.

"We're not going. So, how did you two find us at the Wahaha Building anyway?"

"Don't ask," groaned Ninth Goldfish.

Master Ling raised a finger and shook it in indignation, then grabbed back onto the bin to keep from falling. "We had to bargain for half an hour with that dumb waitress at the Wood Mother Restaurant to tell us who those damned men were. You know what she wants now? No

simple new-model Flying Pigeon, she demanded a Giant mountain bike, with shocks! And pegs! I'm going to be lurking around the International Students Dormitory at Zhe Da Yuquan Campus for all of next week looking for something like that."

Rabbit shook her head in feigned sympathy. "Well, thank you. Both of you. And Old Cricket, too. I don't know why you all keep following me, but I don't think I could have made it without you."

"Or else you would have already been to Six Harmonies Pagoda hours ago," joked Splinter-of-Jade. "I'm equally mystified by the fact that you continue to put up with these crazy bastards."

"Mind your own business, bug!" cried the bicycle thief. "I, for one, am not letting any young woman wander through the big city unaccompanied, and I don't know that a ground-dwelling bird's snack counts as an escort."

They rode through a series of crowded intersections, Rabbit overcoming her fear of biking on the downtown streets in favor of some quality time with Golden Wheel. At long last, they broke through the wall of buildings and crossed one last road, reaching the promenade along the West Lake. The lake, stretching towards the distant peaks like a bed of quicksilver, was ringed on every shore by parks where willows trailed their hanging branches in the water and oddly-shaped rocks reflected their forms on its surface. Tourists, families and honeymooning young couples wandered back and forth on the carved-stone paths, soaking in the beauty of the banks like so many rice plants soaking up the sun. The din of clacking majiang tiles drifted on the breeze from the popular outdoor tea shops farther down the shore. There were no birds to be seen or heard, but their role was filled by electronic speakers disguised as rocks which piped in ethereal Chinese classical music. Rabbit parked her bicycle, locked it up, and walked over a slender stone arch of a bridge to the water's edge. She had been down here quite a few times in the past few years, but the view never ceased to transport her mind to another plane of existence. Her two human followers walked up beside her and shared the view, Ninth Goldfish

breaking into spontaneous poetry.

"A dragon and a phoenix in Heaven
Fought over a precious pearl one day
In the distant reaches of time--
Both wanted to possess its unmatched beauty.

The pearl fell down to Earth,
To escape their bitter rivalry.
As the willow leaves break free from the trees
And cause ripples in the mirror of the lake.

The beauty that was once in Heaven
Fell to Earth and landed in this spot.
Since that day, there has been no other place
Of equal majesty down here on our world.

This pearl anchors and protects the city.
It reigns over the Water element
That keeps the city alive and harmonious.
Without it the mountains would fall upon us.

Beneath the water, a buffalo lives--
Shining with a golden hide in the deep.
It lurks in the bottom mud, waiting for
drought,
When it will emerge and restore the pearl's
beauty.

The fish breasting the ripples
Are the sweetest in the world;
They would be fit for the Jade Emperor's
table,
If only they didn't have so many accursed
bones."

"How true, how true!" shouted Master Ling, applauding the final verse. "I've seen grown men break down crying when they try to eat those fish. So tasty, but there's no getting past those miniature swords they pack inside their guts."

Rabbit kicked a tiny stone off the ledge into the water, watching it sink. "Was that some ancient Water Agent's ballad?"

"No, I just made it up."

"It will be ancient some day, though," Splinter-of-Jade pointed out. "Someone 'just made up' the Earth-Pounding Song, once."

They all nodded in agreement at the elder's sage wisdom.

"What was that about the buffalo?" Rabbit

asked a moment later. "That was a strange thing to make up. Poetry never makes sense to me, anyway."

"I can answer that, in plain words," the fighting cricket interrupted again.

"Since ancient times of great ancientness,
A resplendent golden buffalo has dwelt
In the bottom of this fine muddy lake,
And whenever there was a drought and
the lake dried up the buffalo would
wander out and snort a bunch of nasty
lake water out of his nose and fill it back
up to the brim while the local peasant-
folk rejoiced and celebrated and
praised the *Dao*.

"So anyway, back in the old Eastern Han dynasty, some greedy public officials of the sort that are always hanging around came up with the idea that the golden buffalo would make an excellent present for the Emperor. They organized all of the peasants in the area to come and form bucket chains and build pumps and water wheels to lower the level of the lake. After days of gradual progress, as it shrank away to a little puddle, the beast came compliantly climbing out of the bottom muck. The greedy officials came running into the lake bed with long ropes and short foresight, all competing to be the first to catch hold of the miraculous buffalo. Of course, just as they reached it, the animal did its job and filled the lake back up. That's about how the legend goes, anyway. That was way before my time."

By the time the cricket finished his story, they had torn themselves away from the vista and returned to their bicycles. They rode further south on the road behind the tea shops, quickly deviating from the shore where a row of hotels and nightclubs cut between them. Only occasional glimpses of the greenery and water beyond could be seen flashing between buildings and through mock-ancient carved gates. Rabbit's spirits fell as they returned to the fold of the city.

"When do we get back on the lakeside?" she queried, trying not to sound too annoyed with their rapid progress.

"We won't get right back into the park again," Ninth Goldfish answered with a similar hint of

veiled disappointment in his voice. "They don't allow bicycles on the paths anywhere on this side of the lake. We have to follow Nanshan Road where it runs parallel behind the buildings."

"Too bad, the lake sure is picturesque today," lamented Splinter-of-Jade.

They stopped at a light. The willows were clearly visible through a wide gate, beckoning with their lazy swaying motion.

"I'm hungry," Rabbit announced. She wasn't.

"Why don't we stop here and go into the park for just a moment to find a snack counter?"

"Great idea," the Water Agent answered eagerly and pulled out of traffic to park in the double line of cycles arrayed beside the gate. Rabbit locked Golden Wheel up to the tricycle and practically ran inside. They walked down the shaded path between rows of tall, vertical fir trees to reach the willow-lined shore behind the buildings. Rabbit sat on the edge next to a bed of pink flowers, dangling her feet inches above the water and gazing out over the sky-blue surface. Small wooden tourist boats milled around through the scene; the larger passenger ferries didn't ply the waters on this side. The newly reconstructed Leifeng Pagoda rose like a flame over the lake to the South, its brass fittings shining with solar intensity. A single newly-sprouted lotus leaf no bigger than a rice bowl mimicked the tower, swaying atop its stalk six meters out from where Rabbit was sitting. The sun warmed Rabbit's face as she watched seven pinkish clouds float behind the North Peak, racing the row-boats below. The only other thing in the empty blue sky was a group of kites swooping and soaring over the park to the North. A subtle group of bamboo flutes played *Phoenix Worshipped by a Thousand Birds* over the hidden speaker system. Rabbit swayed her head with the music, closing her eyes halfway.

"Weren't you going to eat something?" the cricket on her shoulder asked, interrupting the reverie.

"In a minute." She looked behind her; Master Ling was standing by the willow, also swaying to the music, and Ninth Goldfish was squatting on the ledge a little farther down.

"Hey guys, go find some food! Nothing too interesting, old man."

"Why should we?" he grumbled.

She shrugged. "You're the ones who insist on being my loyal servants. Do some serving. Here, I'll buy." She took out her wallet and extracted a hundred-*yuan* note from her hoarded majiang winnings. The single *jiao* coin on which she had built her fortune came out with the note, falling into a crease in her lap. She gave the hundred *yuan* to the reluctant old thief, who wandered off through the afternoon tourist crowd with Ninth Goldfish, both men keeping their eyes on the lake.

"That was mean," Splinter-of-Jade chided her.

"I know," she replied, her attention held by the swaying double form of the lotus on the water. "You can go and call them back if you feel bad."

"No, I really don't," he said, also captivated.

She felt around in her lap and picked up the tiny *jiao* coin. She aimed half-heartedly and tossed it in the direction of the young lotus, in the time-honored tradition of good luck charms. The breeze buffeted the light coin back and forth on its arc, but it unerringly landed in the cup of the conical leaf. Rabbit cursed her stupid hand-*qi*.

"Nice throw," the cricket commented lazily. A second later, the plant was jerked under the water; the coin flipped into the air, spun around a few times, and plopped down after it. Ripples spread out from the spot, but were soon absorbed into the general shifting patterns of the lake's surface. Rabbit and Splinter-of-Jade held their breath and stared, suddenly alert. All at once, something splashed out of the water right under the ledge where they were sitting and landed on Rabbit's hand. It was cold and slimy. She screamed.

Chapter Twelve
Beneath the Heavenly Lake lurk Fish from Hell; The Seeker of Numbers is abducted by an ancient bovine.

The fat bullfrog rolled off Rabbit's hand as she snatched it back like it had been touched by a red hot iron.

"Yeeesh, Nasty!"

The wet, shiny amphibian landed on its back, webbed feet slapping at the flagstone spasmodically.

"The powwwer! It filllls me!" it croaked. "I cannot containnn it allll!"

Splinter-of-Jade jumped on the frog's stomach, pinning it down.

"Explain yourself, green brigand!"

It rolled its bulging eyes around in their sockets and gasped. "I see hummman throwww coin long way into tiny immmpossible leaf, I thinnnk hand-*qi* is strrrong. I wwwant."

"You could have asked," Rabbit said, rubbing her wet hand on the edge of a rock in disgust.

"I'm more than happy to give it away to whoever wants to borrow some."

"Frrrog is having thin skin, tasting rrright through its feet. Just wwwanted to have a taste annd leave. Didnnn't know hummman is Immmorrrtal."

"I am *not*!"

"I cannn taste, verrry strong. Too much powwwer!"

The frog went limp and lay in its puddle, throat rising and falling. "Crrricket-bug can get off me now. I mmmay get hungrrry and want to taste bug too."

Splinter-of-Jade hopped off the animal, rubbing his slimy tarsi together and chirping in amusement.

"Just try it, slime-bag."

The frog rolled upright and croaked. "Mmmust tell Lake King about immmmortal. Verrry powwwerful, you are." He leapt backwards off the ledge, spinning head over heels into a perfect dive.

"That was weird," Rabbit commented, turning

back to the view, "but harmless. I hope the others get back with our food before this Lake King fellow shows up. Maybe being out of sight of the lake isn't a bad thing."

"They'd better hurry," the cricket said. Around where the lotus had been pulled under, a patch of golden light began to glow noticeably at an indeterminate depth below the surface. "One guess what that is."

The water bulged upwards and parted as a pair of shining golden horns, long, curved and ridged, swept it aside from below. A bovine head the size of Ninth Goldfish's tricycle followed, water sloughing off its huge, bamboo-leaf shaped ears. Tourists and young children walking nearby shouted and scattered away from the shore, hopping over lines of tape onto prohibited lawns. The buffalo spoke resonantly.

"You are hereby invited to my palace, Immortal."

It grabbed her foot between teeth as large as her head before she could shake off the terror that rooted her to the spot. She smacked it on the snout, but it was like punching an iron lamp-post. The beast pulled her off into the water with a splash. Splinter-of-Jade leapt at the buffalo, and it let go of Rabbit, swinging its solid metal horns around. They sent the cricket sailing off into the treetops. All at once, the great head disappeared beneath the surface again, producing a miniature whirlpool that sucked Rabbit a few meters farther from shore. She treaded water, watching the glimmer of light sink back into the murky depths. She started to make for shore with all haste, but again something slimy touched her skin. She shouted and thrashed around as ropes of muscle wrapped around her legs. Looking down into the water, she was horrified by the sight of a swarm of black eels surrounding her. The evil serpentine fish dragged her down into the depths screaming.

The question of whether these horrid denizens of the deep actually understood the mammalian need for atmospheric oxygen actually ran through Rabbit's head as the darkness around her deepened. Just as she had settled her mind on the reality--and pointless tragedy--of an inadvertent drowning, something hard and pointed burrowed its way between her lips. She let it enter her throat, disgusted beyond belief

but relieved that someone had kept her respiration in mind after all. The experience that followed was not quite like breathing, but it was a passable imitation. Granted a reprieve from imminent death, Rabbit got back to the business of worrying about where the eels were taking her. She couldn't see anything now through the water rushing around her, just a faint brightness in the direction of what was presumably up. She was headed the opposite way. The water wasn't as cold as she had expected way down here, at least. She was swept along by the flapping of dozens of muscular eel tails for what seemed like an hour; she actually started to get pretty bored with the experience after a while. Finally a glow materialized again, straight ahead. Were they returning to the surface? No, she realized as the glow further coalesced into a surface that was much too small. She broke surface in the middle of a large pool inside a dripping, rocky cavern. A glittering chandelier hung from the center of the roof, and the room extended into a massive tunnel lit by more electric lights in elaborate fittings. A tall stone gate standing over the middle of the passage was carved in gold calligraphy, "Golden Buffalo Palace of Harmonious Balance". Rabbit realized that the eels had all slipped away; she was treading water alone in the pool. She swam to the edge and climbed out. The cavern was also pleasantly warm, even though her clothing was comprehensively soaked. She walked through the gate and down the echoing tunnel, lacking any better ideas. She tried to find something large and solid to carry, but the passage was scoured clear of loose rocks. A short walk along, she reached a tall doorway guarded by a pair of monolithic stone turtles. Both of the statues held the traditional fist-sized stone pearls between their jaws; she pulled out the one on the left from between the carved fangs to hold as a weapon, just in case. She cautiously crept between the massive open doors of solid brass into the resplendent hall beyond. Polished rock and red curtains rose to a dizzying height above bubbling fountains. A red carpet led through the entrance hall to the rest of the palace beyond.

Two man-sized crabs clattered out of alcoves on either side of Rabbit, surprising her so badly that she raised the stone ball in her hand and

almost hurled it at one of them.

"Wait!" the one on the left commanded, holding its frightening claws out in front of its gaping maw and erect eye-stalks. "We are here to escort you to the gathering hall, young Immortal." It took the lead without another word. She followed warily between the two monster crustaceans, down the carpet and through a series of other equally impressive halls. Turtles, crabs, and frogs of all sizes milled about in every room, stopping to stare at the embarrassed outsider as she passed. Five rooms in, they entered a cavern that could have held the entire library building of Yuquan Campus. Most of the great hall was filled with water, in which throngs of living forms--some of them impossibly large--could be seen poking up their heads. Only a single causeway and an island in the center rose above the shimmering pool by a few centimeters, surrounded by grandiose statues of assorted lake creatures. The island was overhung by a silk canopy supported by four columns. Underneath sat the Golden Buffalo. His full body was the size of one of the double-decker city buses that ran on the number ten route near the University; his mighty horns rose a full six meters above the platform. Every inch of the titanic body was solid gold. He lay on his side resplendently, watching his guest with mirror-like orbs of eyes. Two tortoise guards the size of taxi cabs stood erect and motionless on his right and left; behind them, two rows of human skeletons--real or carved she couldn't tell--stood dressed in flowing purple robes.

Rabbit left her crustacean escort behind and strode down the length of the causeway to within five meters of the monster, determined to show a confident face. She bowed as low as she was able.

"Thanks for the invitation, Master Buffalo. Your place is really incredible. I'm afraid I'm on important business, though; perhaps your servants can help me to the South shore of the lake?"

The beast tilted his gargantuan head. "Who are you, Immortal?" he boomed from somewhere within his resonant metallic body, his mouth unmoving. The voice echoed from the highest reaches of the cavern.

"People call me Rabbit, and I'm not an

Immortal—at least not that I know of."

The King of the Lake focused an eye on her; she could see her reflection in the surface. "What is that in your hand?"

She looked down; she was still holding the carved ball from the statue. "Oh, just a stone pearl from the turtle's mouth at the main gate. Sorry, I'll be sure to put it back on the way out."

"Is that something ordinary mortals are regularly capable of these days? I must be more out of touch with the surface than I thought."

Rabbit didn't understand. "I guess so... why wouldn't we be?"

"Do you know nothing about the ancient traditions of architecture? The stone pearl in the mouth of a statue is carved to be locked inside, and cannot physically be removed without breaking off the jaws or teeth. It is said that anyone who can take the pearl from the undamaged fangs will instantly become an Immortal. Unless, of course, they already are one."

"Okay, fine, I give up." She tossed the pearl far off into the pool. "I'm an Immortal. What of it?"

"I urgently require your flesh."

She took a step back from the throne despite herself.

"Recently," he explained, ignoring her reaction, "only a few decades ago, in fact, my long centuries of solitude came to an end. A beautiful cow buffalo of my rare golden species came to this lake from another province, where her home was destroyed by the building of a dam. We soon started a family together to propagate our vanishing line. My mate and I have both been loyal Communists ever since the Revolution, so in accordance with our government's highly beneficial One Child Policy we decided to have only a single calf. This calf, however, was a daughter named Moon Reflection. After much discussion we concluded that, though we live in the middle of a city district, as water buffaloes we are creatures of the countryside. Under the policy, as you know, rural couples are permitted to have a second offspring if the first is female. Thus we produced our second calf, a son we named Moon Eater."

"This lake, however, is not as hospitable a home

as it used to be. The city has grown and it is inevitable that it will have an impact on our water quality. I can handle the pollution myself, but I fear for our young ones. Both of them have been sickly from birth because of the baneful influence of the unnatural chemicals in the water. Moon Eater disappeared some time ago, and though our endless searches of the lake have turned up nothing, I believe he has finally succumbed to his sickness in some secluded cave. As I mourn for him, I fear ever more for my only surviving descendant, Moon Reflection. She must not meet the same fate."

Rabbit stood silently for a long moment before she realized he had finished his piece. "I'm very sorry," she said. "How might I aid you in this?"

"Moon Reflection must eat you," he answered, raising his head back up to full height. "The flesh of an Immortal human is said to add two thousand years to a lifetime."

She looked over her shoulder at the two armored crabs blocking off the causeway. "First time I've heard that one," she said, mind racing. "Do you think you could do me and your daughter a favor and let me clean up first? I'm not going to be very healthy for anyone in this state. I smell like eel."

As Rabbit had hoped, the ancient Golden Buffalo hadn't watched many movies in the last hundred years. "So be it," he said. "You can go to the human quarters to rest and freshen up, concentrating your *qi* energies. The crabs will be by shortly to butcher you. Humans, take the Immortal to your palace."

To Rabbit's surprise, the two rows of purple-robed skeletons stood at attention and filed forwards, bones clacking together. The gruesome beings bowed before the Lake King and walked down the causeway, pushing a horrified Rabbit along with them.

The skeletal contingent led her down a side passage through a different set of halls. She tentatively tried out some communication.

"So, you guys have your own palace, huh? Nice."

"Yes, the Golden Buffalo is most benevolent," a barely audible breezy whisper answered from within the robe of a skeleton on her right side. She cringed.

"Were all of you also used as medicine, before

you moved in?"

"No," said the whisper, "We foolishly tried to capture our King out of our own greed, long, long ago. He defeated and killed us, but in his grace allowed us to continue as his servants and work off our debt of sins."

Rabbit marveled. These must be the drowned Han officials from Splinter-of-Jade's story. Two thousand years seemed like an awfully long sentence for such common, petty avarice.

"That's nice of him. How are the hours?"

"Not bad," whispered the skeleton.

At that moment, they passed through a more man-sized doorway with the calligraphy for *man* and *palace* carved above it. There was a pleasant little courtyard beyond, decorated with twisted standing stones but no trees or plants. The dead men led her through a dining hall to a luxurious, fully equipped bath of ancient style.

"You take baths?" she asked incredulously.

"No," came the whisper, "But you may." The skeletons filed out of the room and shut the door. She heard a metal bar slide into place. So, she thought, the facilities were here just for the peace of mind of the dead men. Hot steaming water began to pour out of a stone spout in the wall and fill the large, shallow pool. Rabbit figured she ought to think about escape, but she was awfully smelly and the water did look nice. She started to unbutton her favorite yellow shirt, which was soaking wet and a bit less yellow than when she had put it on that morning.

She coughed. Something was caught in her throat. She bent double, hacking and choking. Suddenly she remembered the pointed object that had pushed its way into her mouth earlier to help her breathe underwater. She fought for breath and heaved mightily, coughing out a spiral snail shell the size of a thumb-tip onto the stone floor. The little snail emerged from its shell and waved its eye-stalks at her.

"Thanks," it said in a tiny squeaky voice, "that was pretty nasty."

Chapter Thirteen

The Champion goes in search of his abducted ward; blown astray to the high peak, he battles the rebellious masters.

Splinter-of-Jade fell from the top branches of the densely-planted fir trees, frightening a few cicadas and a squirrel on the way down. He landed in the thick ground cover, an embarrassed tangle of legs. He crawled to the promenade and started searching the crowd for his remaining companions. Rabbit and the buffalo were long gone. Tourists huddled around the tiny screens of their digital cameras excitedly and peered into the water, eyes wide. A minute later, he spotted Master Ling and Ninth Goldfish walking back. The bicycle thief was holding two white plastic bags of snacks and whistling, but concern was dawning on the Water Agent's face. The two men stood behind the crowd trying to see through. Splinter-of-Jade hopped over to them, perching on the Agent's shoe to avoid the feet of the crowd.

"The buffalo got her," he reported.

The two men stared down at the cricket. "I'm not as surprised as I should be," said Master Ling. "Did the good beast mention where he was taking her, by any chance?"

"His palace, he said. We can be pretty sure that narrows it down to the area of the lake."

They moved up along the shore a little ways from where the crowd was gathered so they could get close enough to the edge to have a look.

"My hundred-faceted eyes can spot evil at ten thousand kilometers," the cricket boasted, "but not down into all this muddy water. If I had a good vantage point to see the whole lake from above we'd be a lot better off."

He scanned the surroundings. Leifeng Pagoda was fairly tall and right on the water, but it was a long ways down the shore. The North Peak and other surrounding mountains were even more distant. Two or three eagles were swooping around over the water to the North--if only he was on better terms with the avian races. He started. Eagles, here? Focusing his

mighty vision closer, he saw that the flyers were in fact bird-shaped kites being flown from the shore. Perfect.

"Up the shore! Kites!" he shouted, and grabbed on tightly to Ninth Goldfish's boot laces as the two men guessed his plan and set off running.

Three old men were flying the stunt kites from the waterside not far away. They used elaborate two-handed reels to swoop their flyers in and play them back out in an amazingly lifelike manner. Ninth Goldfish ran up to the nearest one and tapped him on the shoulder, panting.

"Good morning.... We need to borrow... your kite. Please."

"Why sure," the plump old man said with an amiable smile. "Have a go." He handed the whirring reel to the Water Agent. It spun madly like a miniature bicycle wheel on a hill, and the bird immediately made a dive for the lake surface.

"Whoa, wait!" Ninth Goldfish shouted and held the shaking instrument at arm's length. "Just bring it back down for a second!"

The man took control again and expertly turned the kite their way, reeling in the line as the eagle glided straight into his hands under its own power. It proved to be a simple construction of hand-painted silk stretched over a bamboo frame, about the wingspan of a large real-life bird of prey. "Are you interested in buying? I could make you another one just like it, in a week or two. Make me an offer."

"Actually..." the Agent thought for a moment.

"Yes, let me have a look." He took the kite and pretended to scrutinize the workmanship closely. Splinter-of-Jade caught on to what he had in mind and swiftly jumped into the boat-like top of the bird's body as Ninth Goldfish held it low to study in the sunlight. He handed the kite back to the man underside-forward, nodding in a businesslike manner.

"Good, good. No problem there."

"So are you interested?" he asked hopefully.

"Oh no, we're not buying." He looked at Master Ling and back. "Actually, we're from the Wildlife Bureau. We've had reports of people using actual eagles of various endangered species as kites. Yours is clearly not covered in real feathers, though. You should take it as a compliment that your excellent craftsmanship fooled us."

The man gave a barely credulous squint. "Well, thank you I guess. I'll let you know if I see any of that going on."

The Agent and his sidekick saluted awkwardly and retreated to a safe distance to watch the results of their improvised scheme.

The man re-launched his kite without noticing the minuscule added weight of the extra passenger. As soon as it stabilized at the limit of the reel's string length, Splinter-of-Jade climbed out of the back of the eagle's hollow head and ventured a look over the edge. It wasn't the most stable viewing platform, but it did offer a good angle of view over most of the lake. He turned his powerful compound eyes on the vista point by point, scanning the surface and depths below for anything notable. The vessel swooped to one side, upsetting his carefully mapped progression. He started over from the other end. The kite sailed around in a complete circle and returned to face the lake. This could start to get annoying, he thought. And dizzy, too. He scoured the edges of the Bai and Su Causeways and Solitary Island, to no avail. The craft started another swift rotation. As it spun, he had an instant's view another kite heading his way from behind. He hoped these old men knew well enough not to get their strings tangled. He turned to settle his mind on the matter, and realized that the approaching craft was not a kite at all; it was a real bird! Not only that, it was a snow-white crane with a wingspan like the Phoenix itself. The beady eyes in the middle of its blood-red head pierced his tiny heart as it screeched. The monster bird tore into the kite, snapping it free of its tether with a jolt. Splinter-of-Jade jumped off the kite just far enough to deliver a kick under the base of the crane's savage beak. The attacker wheeled off with a chilling scream. He caught the edge of a silk wingtip with a single pair of middle tarsi, scrabbling for purchase on the slick material.

He pulled himself up to the forward edge of the wing, looking over to see that the freed kite had gone into a rapidly descending glide. The boundless surface of the lake approached with the speed of a city bus. The little craft was headed for the mid-lake island pavilion known as Three Pools Mirroring the Moon, but he could tell it would never reach land before

splashing down. Silk didn't float particularly well, and neither did the cricket champion. Just as he was preparing for a watery landing, he heard screams drifting up from the island ahead. He looked to see a second, much smaller island rise up in front of the original one; the water parted to reveal a monster turtle. It raised its boulder-like head towards the oncoming kite and opened its jaws wide. A powerful gust of fetid wind hit the cricket's craft full force, lifting its head back up. The eagle soared upwards on the magical draft, faster and faster over the island and onwards across the lake. Splinter-of-Jade didn't dare look over the edge again until he was completely past the lake and flying over Lingyin Road towards the mountains. Not what he'd had in mind, he thought, but the monster turtle guardian's intervention had given away the location of the Buffalo King's palace. Now if only he wasn't leaving the city at tremendous speed on a supernatural gust of stinky turtle-breath, he would be right on track. As he soared even farther afield, he started to worry that the breeze would take him all the way to the other side of the mountains to the industrial Frontierlands on the Western side. He was, indeed, drifting higher than most of the peaks now; only the lofty North Peak, the highest spot in the area of Hangzhou, reached into the sky at his level. He climbed further out along the wing to try and guide his craft closer in that direction.

Miraculously, he did manage to bring the kite around towards the top of the peak. There was a small old temple to the Dao built on the spot, along with a towering radio transceiver antennae. His kite was determined to make for the former. The bamboo eagle sped over the heads of a gang of *wushu* practitioners performing martial arts on the terrace out front, and right for the gaping doors of the shrine. In it flew, as unerring as an arrow fired from a bow by a master archer, crashing through the plates of offerings and incense and landing roughly in the massive concrete lap of the Jade Emperor. The bamboo frame twisted on impact, but didn't snap; the cricket was thrown free of the craft. Bananas from the offering table rolled freely around the room.

A pair of young monks in yellow robes ran in from an adjacent room at the noise. Both

slipped on bananas and fell over each other in the middle of the shrine. Splinter-of-Jade hopped down from the lap of the idol and fled the room, apologizing hurriedly.

"Very sorry, I couldn't control the thing at all. Just a freak accident, could have happened with any kite. Terribly dangerous toys."

"Demon in the temple!" shouted one of the monks from where he lay sprawled on his back on top of a few smashed bananas. "Iron Chain Gang, don't let it escape!"

The scattered *wushu* adepts on the mountain-top heard the cry and sprang into action, encircling the front gate as Splinter-of-Jade emerged from the shrine. He perched on the high threshold and sized up his opponents. The fifteen vigilantes were muscular young men, dressed in tight blue jeans and loose black dress shirts, earrings and stainless steel chains hanging everywhere. Three of the group wore leather jackets despite the warmth of the sunny day. About half of them sported sunglasses.

"Oh shit, *wushu* punks! What did I do to deserve this?" he lamented out loud.

"Come on, shrimp! You want to try out the Iron Chain Gang?" answered one member with a short-shaved head. The gang rushed him all at once, and he launched himself into the fight with gusto.

"Let Old Cricket teach you young boys a thing or two about martial arts!" he cried. He began cracking jaws and hands all around, but there were just too many of the punks, and he had to admit their martial skills were undoubtedly well-honed. Their endless blows began to get the better of the cricket fighter as he was pummeled back and forth between fists and feet like a badminton shuttle.

"Shouldn't you kids be in school?" he shouted as he got in a triumphant blow on a denim-clad rear end. The young men laughed contemptuously.

"We rule this mountain every afternoon, bug," a leather-jacketed lout answered. "And we'd rule it all morning, if we weren't partying all night!"

"Yeah, getting up at three thirty to climb up the mountain is for the grandpas!" another shouted as he smacked the cricket high into the air with a rock-hard kick. "It's your bad luck you showed up on our watch."

That gave Splinter-of-Jade an idea. He was in sore need of some backup. A boot came down

hard to crush him into the pavement; he flipped its owner onto his back with a swift throw.

"You know, not all of the grandpas climb up here so early," he announced, fending off another barrage of blows.

"Oh no? How's that, little fly?"

"Some of them never go home at all." Buffeted into the air again, he shouted in his most thundering voice: "Old Purple Palace Masters of *Wushu*, there's a battle to be fought!"

A rustling from the trees surrounding the mountain-top caused all of the gang to turn and look. One by one, seven old men with white beards and dirty woolen jackets leapt down from the tree-tops to the pavilion, performing multiple flips and somersaults on the way down. They surrounded the Iron Chain Gang on all sides; the shortest man with the longest beard spoke fiercely.

"We don't mind if you young punks wish to practice on this peak while we take our afternoon naps, but if you're going to start waylaying helpless insects at the Jade Emperor's temple we really shall have to put our foot down." He struck a perfect tiger pose. "On your asses."

"Get them!" shouted several Iron Chains at once. The encircling Purple Palace School adepts rushed in, knocking the collective wind out of the younger fighters rapidly. Fists, feet and entire bodies flew freely across the mountain-top as the *wushu* brawl unleashed its fury. Great skill was employed on both sides, but the muscular young upstarts were no match for bodies trained in the myriad fighting poses for many decades. Splinter-of-Jade merely returned to the temple threshold to watch the performance. It was nice to know he could always count on the old guys to be around wherever the *qi* flowed freely.

The fight soon played itself out, and the last of the young louts fled down the steep mountain paths to escape their trouncing at the deadly hands of their elders. The victors laughed, hurled a few colorfully anachronistic obscenities, and swaggered back to their tree-top naps without another word. The oldest Purple Palace fighter approached Splinter-of-Jade's perch, chuckling heartily.

"Nice to be of service, Grandfather Cricket, but

I'm surprised you couldn't hold your own against that bunch of schoolboys. You're going soft in your old age."

Splinter-of-Jade looked closer at the wrinkled face, and recognized with surprise a former trainer of his from sometime before the Cultural Revolution. He bowed his antennae respectfully.

"Master Phoenix, you old monkey! And I thought you were ancient the last time I saw you!"

"Ah, for those days of youth! I was so much more handsome then, but I was almost as ignorant of my *qi* power as those punks. I've gained much since my cricket-fighting days of old," the master sighed.

"So, napping in trees all day is the big secret? If only people knew!"

The man wagged a bony finger. "You should talk! It looks like all you've managed to do is stay alive and eat chestnuts for another forty years! What happened to all my training?"

"Sorry, Old Master, but the world has gone soft lately, and I'm out of practice. Until today, that is."

"Oh?" Master Phoenix's paper-thin ears perked up.

"I've fallen into a bit of an adventure, escorting a young Immortal--who doesn't know she is one--across town. But now she's been taken by the Golden Buffalo under the lake, and his palace guardian blew me all the way up here to the peak. I fear his intentions if I don't come to her rescue in time." He shrugged with his hind legs. "That's not to mention my problem with cold. I don't imagine it will be very comfortable at the bottom of that old lake."

The *wushu* master smiled a crooked-toothed smile. "Is that all?" He scooped the cricket up carefully in his thin fingers and walked across the pavilion to the railing facing out over the lake. He raised him high to share the view.

"With the proper approach, all obstacles are surmountable. To overcome Water one needs the power of Earth, and to defeat cold, Fire is required. To defeat enemies one needs only the strength within one's own body." He drew back his arm and closed his fist, which began to glow with ethereal flame as he concentrated his *qi*. "Meteor Storm!" Master Phoenix shouted, echoing his cry off distant peaks, and hurled Splinter-of-Jade from the mountain.

Chapter Fourteen

The thief and the sweeper take a long ride off a short pier to the Palace of Harmonious Balance; the Water Agent has an audience with the Lake King.

When the cricket champion's airship was attacked by the huge crane and sent adrift into the lake, Ninth Goldfish and Master Ling unanimously gave up all hope of rescue for Rabbit. They walked away from the bench that had served as their vantage point, peeling tea-boiled eggs morosely.

"The taste of defeat is bitter indeed," lamented the bicycle thief. "How long have these things been soaking, a week? Utter failure." He popped another dripping brown egg into his mouth whole. His companion shook his head in frustration.

"Both of the powerful Immortals are gone. What chance do two ordinary working men have of aiding them now?"

The thief spat the rubbery yolk out into the bushes, grimacing. "You still think that Rabbit is an Immortal? I'm willing to bet a whole Beijing duck that she's a fox spirit."

"Really? So why have you been following her halfway across the city?"

The elder man shrugged. "You've read the stories. Wherever there are fox spirits there tend to be buried treasures and wild parties and whatnot. They're just good company to keep."

The Water Agent wasn't so sure. "I've never heard of a fox spirit who was anything less than enchantingly beautiful, and our Rabbit certainly doesn't fit that profile."

"Whatever you want to believe. It's no matter, she's gone now."

"True, true. I do worry what the Great Buffalo has in store for her, though. I hope he's as benevolent as the Water Masters say. She was a perfectly nice young woman."

"The way I see it," the thief reasoned, "There are two possibilities. Either the big cow really did just want to have a chat, and he'll help her on her way afterwards better than we could have; or else he means her some harm, in which

case she and her bug can handle the situation for themselves. We'd just get in the way."

The two former escorts walked out the gates of the lakeside park, back to the rows of bicycles parked outside. The thief eyed the well-built yellow bicycle that Ninth Goldfish had given to Rabbit earlier in the day.

"I guess our fox friend won't be needing your gift anymore, will she?"

The Water Agent sighed. "Fine, I guess you can have Golden Wheel. Use it in good health."

"Very good!" the old man exclaimed. He pulled a lock-pick out from behind his ear and scrubbed the bicycle's lock open in a matter of seconds. "This is an unusual model you have here, but indisputably a masterpiece of engineering. It's worth far more than any fancy Giant mountain bike. I could eat Big Horse Mouth's stinky tofu for a month with this thing."

He hopped on the seat and bounced, testing the tires. "Well, I imagine you've got a lot of trash to pick up, friend. Don't take it too hard." He backed the cycle out and waited for an opening in traffic to ride away.

"Wait! Friends of the Immortal! Wait right there!" a tiny voice shouted from back inside the park. Ninth Goldfish grabbed Golden Wheel's rear rack to keep Master Ling from riding away. The thief groaned.

"Who is that?" the Agent called back, searching the trees beyond the gate.

"Back here on the path! I've been chasing you two all the way from the lake. I'm moving as fast as I can."

Ninth Goldfish ran back inside to find the source of the tiny voice; Master Ling stayed on his bicycle seat outside, still holding out hope for a quick departure.

"Down here! No, down here! FREEZE!" shouted the voice. The Water Agent wobbled on one foot, moving the other to one side. A snail looked up at him from the carved flagstones, its trail of slime leading back towards the lake.

"Ooh, I'm sorry," he apologized, stepping back.

"Don't mention it," said the snail, gasping for breath after its mad dash. "There's no time to lose. Take me to your vehicles."

It pulled its body fully inside its spiral shell and the Agent picked it up, running back to the

bicycles. He set the gastropod down on the middle of his handlebars and it grabbed on.

"Where to?" he asked.

"The lake, of course," ordered the snail. "Just trust me on this."

He unlocked his tricycle and pulled it out of the line, jumping on. "Come on, old man, you heard the guy."

Master Ling looked to Heaven to make sure the gods could see what he had to put up with. "I should have known it wouldn't be that easy. I get a beautiful bike, no strings attached, and next thing I know they want me to drive it into the lake."

They sped through the gates and down the shaded path before anyone could tell them they weren't allowed. They picked up speed as the pavement's edge drew closer, ringing their bells to get tourists out of the way.

"Right in?" Ninth Goldfish checked.

"Please."

The two cycles splashed down and immediately started to sink. The riders locked their legs under the seats and clung to their rides. Immediately, dozens of snails detached from where they were waiting on the water line and propelled themselves out to the vehicles, suctioning on to the frames. The water around them was pushed back by an invisible force and they sank as if into a well. The water closed over the top of the two bubbles and they continued sinking down to the shallow edge of the lake bed. As the bubbles touched the bottom mud, it was pressed down by the same mysterious force into a hard, clay-like surface on which the cycles rested quite solidly.

"Now ride forward, fast!" the snail between the Agent's handlebars commanded. "I'll let you know if you start to go off track."

Ninth Goldfish began to pedal, cautiously at first, then faster as he gained confidence in the way his bubble of air and solid ground followed him. Master Ling followed behind, but he quickly lost sight of the thief in the darkness as they descended. Soon he couldn't see anything at all, but just as he started to worry a dull glow grew around the edges of the bubble until he could perceive fish and floating debris being pushed aside as he rode.

"So I give up, how are you doing this?" he asked the snail.

"Magic," came the reply. "Most snails can perform a bit of alchemical magic. Creating air, making light from darkness, warmth from cold, that sort of thing. It's what we get for all the bother of carrying these cauldrons around on our backs."

"And you are servants of the Golden Buffalo?" he asked, carrying on before his disbelief could catch up with him.

"Kind of," the snail laughed. Other bits of squeaking laughter joined in from the snails on the rear of the vehicle. "He keeps us around for our magic, but we differ on some points. Like humanity, for instance. The big guy has had a chip on his shiny shoulder ever since those Han officials tried to screw around with his lake two thousand years ago. He's even more touchy about your race these days, what with the pollution and noisy ferries churning the waters all day long. Some days, I swear he's this close to drowning the whole city." The snail held its eye-stalks close together. "But we snail-kind have a different perspective. Most of the population here, or at least our ancestors, were released into the lake by kind old people trying to earn merit for their impending visits to the underworld. The pious old souls buy out whole seafood shops and set us free off the Long Bridge and Yongjin Pond. So we snails see a better side of the city's people." The creature stretched its head a millimeter closer and whispered, "To tell the truth, we're close to all-out revolt over this issue. The King didn't actually send us to bring you to the palace at all. But here we are."

The glow of the supernatural bubble hid that of the palace entrance until they were right upon it. Ninth Goldfish rode up a steep incline to the surface of the pool; he had to dismount and push the cycle up the last few meters. Master Ling emerged right behind him, looking only the slightest bit overawed.

"The snails say the buffalo wants to feed Rabbit to his daughter, my boy! She may be a fox spirit, but that's just not done."

So it was as he had feared. He wasn't entirely ready to believe the snails, though; the Golden Buffalo was arguably the most important deity of Hangzhou's Agents of Water, after all--the Metal Mother who produced all water in the life-giving lake. It was time to sort things out.

"Right. Let's leave the cycles outside and split up; you go find Rabbit, and I'll have a talk with the Lake King. Maybe we can come to some agreement." They rode up the long passage towards the gates.

A few minutes later Ninth Goldfish entered the grand audience hall, his bamboo-handled broom and dustpan--the badges of his office--slung over his shoulder and the snail hidden in the pocket of his vest. The two giant crabs who had escorted him from the gate stopped at the causeway before the massive throne and allowed him to continue forward. He stopped ten paces from the King of the Lake and kowtowed five times.

"Great Golden Buffalo of Harmonious Balance, Metal Mother who keeps the mountain themselves at bay with your benevolent breath of water, I am your loyal servant in the Northern city!"

The majestic beast eyed him contemptuously. "Oh no, who let a Water Agent in here?" the mighty voice echoed from within his breast.

"But... I am merely your servant, here with a petition to your majesty..." he stammered.

"Go clean out the gutters, trash-man! Why must you insist on bowing before me?"

The Agent's head spun with the resonating voice. "You are our leader, the Mother of Water! Without your geomantic influence our city would be reduced to wasteland by the untamed Earth elements from the surrounding wilderness! Our endless duty is nothing next to your grace."

The buffalo sighed, raising his snout to Heaven.

"Let me explain something. I lived in this lake long before there was a single bamboo hut on its shore. I have nothing to do with your city or its accursed *feng shui*. Furthermore, you ridiculous Water Agents have everything backwards. It's not *wild* Earth element that swamps your city and my lake. It's not *wild* Earth that rules your Frontier; the wasteland is of your own creation. The garbage you pick up off the streets all day long doesn't come from the wilderness. Your city spawns its own filth, and the more spotless you try to make it, the more you try to control the Earth element, the more your dark Frontier will spread. And the more poisonous *my* lake will become. Now get out of my palace before I wash *you* away."

Furious, Ninth Goldfish wielded his broom and dustpan in a two-handed street battle stance, following the ancient martial forms of the Water Agents.

"Can it be that you have forgotten the sacred pact between the people and the lake, dating back to the beginning of history, when you would fill the lake in times of drought to save my ancestors from starvation? Now you have one of the city's daughters locked up in your palace, ready for slaughter! In the name of the Water element that brings life to both our worlds, release Rabbit!"

"Yes, it's true," the deity conceded with a snort. "I did once help people in times of need, and support their livelihood. Harmony reigned in both our worlds. But you were so much less annoying back then."

The buffalo bowed his horns. His two monster turtle guardians trundled forward to block off the throne. On the other end of the causeway, Ninth Goldfish could hear the pair of crab soldiers approach, claws skittering on stone. He turned to face them, weapons held high. The crustaceans picked up speed, rushing him claws-first. He jumped and cracked them both right on the carapace, vaulting over their pinchers in a perfectly executed Splashing Stone move. He turned and swung at them again in a Tidal Wave attack, but one of the beasts grabbed onto the metal shovel of his dustpan. He brought the broom down to sweep at its eye-stalks, hoping to force a retreat; it caught the handle in its other claw and wrenched it out of his grip. The second crab dove into the water, popping up like a cork on the other side of the causeway and leaping out to grab at his feet. Before he knew it, he was pinned on the cold, wet floor.

"You've gone insane!" he shouted, struggling against the iron-like vices. "You're not fit to rule this lake any more!"

"I don't any more," the buffalo boomed back, "land is publicly owned. I just live here."

The claws tightened; the crab at the Water Agent's feet took both his ankles in one deadly pincher and aimed the other at its victim's unprotected stomach, blowing bubbles from its foaming mouth. He closed his eyes. A whooshing noise like a barge whistle was suddenly heard outside, entering the hall at a

deafening pitch a split second later. There was a painful jerk on his wrists and ankles, accompanied by the sound of cracking seafood shells magnified a hundredfold. He opened his eyes; the crab soldiers were scattered into scraps of shell and white flesh, littering the causeway and floating in the water on both sides. Only their claws were left attached to his limbs. It took him a second longer to spot the source of the explosion. Splinter-of-Jade, the cricket champion, stood on the causeway, steam rising from his tiny armored body.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, "I had to borrow some *qi*."

Chapter Fifteen

The Number Seeker takes a bath; a great battle is fought under the West Lake.

Rabbit's request for a bath hadn't entirely been a ruse to buy time; she really had been pretty smelly. She sat in the old-fashioned pool, steam rising around her, and washed herself as she questioned the snail that had stowed away in her throat.

"So the buffalo makes use of your magic for odd jobs like helping visiting surface-folk breathe and stay warm and stuff, but you're actually all against him?"

"Not *against* him, just *plotting* against him," the snail clarified. "Snail-kind are concerned about the Lake King's growing animosity towards the people of the city. We think he's too old-fashioned for the modern state of things. It makes no sense to have a rustic farm animal ruling over what has become an urban lake. That's why a group of us transformed his heir, Moon Eater, through our alchemy and hid him away. If the Buffalo is deposed now, there will be no others to claim his throne. The West Lake will belong to all those who live beneath its waters."

"Okay," said Rabbit, pulling an ancient tortoise-shell comb through her short hair. "And you want me to help? You may be disappointed in my skills at political intrigue."

"Not really, we just felt that it was our duty to help out an Immortal human of the city--

especially as it was our kidnapping of Moon Eater that led to the King's present infatuation with the flesh of Immortals. Now, unfortunately, you may have become the tipping point of our revolt. The leaders of our resistance decided to contact your Immortal companions and bring them here to rescue you. If the reports I'm receiving at this moment are anything to go by, there's a confrontation brewing."

Rabbit sat up straight. "What reports?"

The seditious snail bounced its eye-stalks together. "Antennae. We're in mass contact at all times. What I'm hearing right now is that the Immortal known as Water Agent is facing the Buffalo alone. I hope for his sake that his powers are truly great."

Rabbit splashed her face down in the water and brought it back up. "No. He's not even an Immortal. He's just a garbage collector off the streets!"

"Oh dear," said the plotter. "You'd better get dressed then. I'm also receiving reports that your older companion is right outside."

There was a soft rap on the door. Rabbit jumped out of the pool and ran to it. "Splinter-of-Jade?" she whispered.

"No, it's me, Uncle Ling," the bicycle thief whispered back, to her great disappointment. The heavy latch on the outside of her prison lifted with an overly noisy scrape.

"Wait!" she hissed. "Don't rescue me just yet! I have to get my clothes." She ran to the stone screen over which she was attempting to dry her clothes and dressed quickly. The garments were just as soaking wet as when she had taken them off. Buttoning up her yellow shirt, she picked up her snail informant and opened the door cautiously.

"Hurry!" Master Ling urged, fidgeting in the dark corner opposite the bath-house. He held a relatively large snail in one open palm and a dangerous-looking iron light fixture in the other hand. "The guards are all busy now, but there are a lot of *things* crawling around down here and it's a good distance back to the bicycles."

"We're not running away here!" she remonstrated decisively. "They say Ninth Goldfish is facing the Buffalo all alone. Where's the cricket?"

The thief shrugged. "He got carried away."

"Well then, we have to go help out. Follow me, I know the way."

She snuck out into the courtyard of the Human Palace, where she was startled by a pile of purple robes and bones scattered between the ornamental rocks.

"Who killed the Han officials?" she asked, trying to slow her heart back down after the shock.

"Please!" whispered Master Ling indignantly. "I may be just an old thief, but I can take on a bunch of two-thousand-year-old bureaucrats."

"Nice work," she commented, eyeing the dusty remains. "I hope you can handle a bunch of lake monsters the same way. Come on!" She picked up a heavy, solid leg bone from among the debris and wielded it; it made for a mildly distasteful cudgel, but the best she could come up with on short notice.

They ran out of the palace of the no-longer-dead officials into the larger main halls. Turtles and frogs scattered out of their path as they made for the central corridor through gilded spaces with vaulted ceilings.

"Something's approaching through the lake," Rabbit's snail warned from her shirt pocket. "It's coming fast!" She stopped and looked around, confused. It took her a moment to realize the creature was relaying a report from its antennae. They had reached the fountain-filled hall where their side passage split off from the main corridor; they turned towards the doors in the direction of the palace gates. A whistle filled the air, growing louder quickly. Rabbit and Master Ling jumped back against the curtained wall as a miniature flaming comet roared down the length of the room towards the heart of the palace, the pitch of the deafening noise rising and falling with the speed of its passing.

"What in the name of stinky tofu--" exclaimed the thief.

"Don't just stand there gaping, old man! Let's find out!" Rabbit shouted, already halfway across the hall. He rushed to catch up.

The rescuer and escapee ran into the grand audience hall to find a scene of absolute chaos. The water around the throne and causeway churned with the excited thrashing and leaping of a hundred frenzied lake creatures. Some of them had begun climbing out onto solid

ground. Ninth Goldfish stood at the center of the bridge, struggling to pry a giant disembodied crab claw off his wrist. Just then, one of the King's monster turtle guardians was flung head over tail through empty space in seeming slow motion. The gargantuan reptile crashed into the side wall with a resounding boom, sending shock waves to the very roots of the entire palace and the island above. It dropped into the water on top of a group of fleeing lake denizens, the almighty splash causing waves to wash over the causeway. Rabbit didn't wait to see what was happening up by the throne; she rushed down the slippery path to the Water Agent's aid, swinging her makeshift cudgel at the oversized frogs and crabs that were attempting to storm the bridge. Ninth Goldfish pulled free of the crab-claw and grabbed his fallen weapons as she reached him, joining in the fight to keep the causeway clear. Master Ling, surprisingly, came up right behind Rabbit, his scavenged iron light fixture causing great damage. Long smooth tails as thick as tree limbs lashed out at them from the water and amphibious foes fought their way out of the churning pool onto shore, attempting to swamp the three humans. They fended off all comers. The student and the thief stood with their backs together for protection; the Water Agent fought expertly in the traditional style of his ancient sect, sending animals sailing over the waves with flying sweeps of boots, broom and cast-iron dustpan. Rabbit glanced past him for a moment between waves of attack. The second turtle guardian writhed in front of the Buffalo throne, thrashing its head around, neck extended upwards to its full length.

"What's happening to those giant turtles?" she shouted to Ninth Goldfish.

"That damned cricket of yours!" he yelled back, crushing a dog-sized crab under his shovel.

"Woohoo!" she cheered, deflecting a low-swinging eel tail. "Go Splinter-of-Jade!"

The next time she had a chance to look, the great turtle was sliding over the edge of the royal platform, retreating into the depths. The lake-dwellers' onslaught on the causeway immediately melted away into the pool, leaving the three fighters standing alone. The water fell still. Rabbit and her companions turned towards the throne; the Golden Buffalo was standing up

to his full height now, Splinter-of-Jade a barely visible speck in front of the beast.

"Go on, Old Cricket, you can take him!" shouted Master Ling. "You're an un-credited contributing author of the Chess Classic, and he's just a great big cow!"

The buffalo charged, throwing all his titanic weight into a single golden fore-hoof. The causeway bounced up and down with the stone-crushing stomp. The buffalo hurtled forward a few more steps, then spun around with breathtaking agility and charged back.

"My antenna!" shouted an enraged Splinter-of-Jade. He jumped up to meet the King head-on. A sweep of the mighty curved horns sent him flying towards the high, vaulted ceiling. "You bent my antenna!" he repeated as he disappeared into the dark reaches above. An ethereal flame lit up the darkness. The cricket returned to the cave floor like a falling star, a tail of fire streaming behind him. The meteoric insect smashed into the top of the Lake King's head, buckling his front legs and driving him to the ground. "Don't do that, you great big metal plough-puller!"

The buffalo flew into a frenzied dance as his tiny attacker zipped around him like an angry hornet, landing kicks like bullet-strikes all over his golden hide. The King fought back, swiping the fiery comet away with his bone-breaking horns again and again.

After a few long minutes of sparring, the buffalo caught the cricket behind him at the right moment. He kicked solidly, sending Splinter-of-Jade soaring back down the causeway.

"Die, pest!" he roared. The cricket's trajectory carried him back to his companions; he drifted down to Rabbit's shoulder, spiraling to a landing. The glowing flame had died out.

"That's it, I'm done," he reported matter-of-factly.

"What do you mean?! You've got the mud-wallower on the run now!" shouted Master Ling in encouragement.

"Close, but my borrowed *qi* has run clean out," he said. "I need a nap."

The buffalo faced them, snorting and foaming at the mouth. "This... is... ridiculous," he bellowed. "I've put up with you people for far too long. Now I have to fight your *bugs* in my

own home! I'm well past due to put an end to all of this right at the source. As soon as I finish killing you, I'm going to raise the lake to the mountain-tops and wash that whole disgusting city away. I almost feel sorry for the Dragon of the Qiantang River, having to carry all that filth out into the ocean." He raised his massive head to look to the front of the hall and broke into a polished, sinister grin. "Don't let me forget to send our friend the Dragon a thank-you gift for all his trouble, won't you, love?"

The group turned to look. A *second* golden buffalo, just as large but with longer, straighter horns than the King, stood blocking the entire exit.

"Certainly dear, but first things first. Let me help you clean up here."

"Oh, that's right," said Rabbit, "he's married now. I forgot to tell you all that."

The pair of buffaloes advanced slowly from each end of the causeway. The interlopers tried to stay in the middle as the distance closed. Scaly forms writhed up against the sides, daring them to jump off.

"Save the bug for me, won't you, honey? He called me some very unkind names."

"Certainly, love, as long as I get to stomp the female. I've never killed an Immortal before." Something tugged at Rabbit's shirt. She looked down to see the snail peeking out of her shirt pocket.

"I've sent the signal to rise up! Get ready for some running!" it said. Rabbit looked around the hall, confused at the information. Who was rising up? Oh!

"The snails!" she shouted. Right on cue, a black sea of gastropods streamed up onto the causeway from under the ledges on either end. The buffalo couple didn't notice the slimy wave until the snails were climbing up their hind legs.

"Yeeeeeee-uch!" screamed the Queen. They hopped around with Earth-shaking bellows, smashing myriads of snails beneath their hooves until they were slipping in a half dozen centimeters of slime and pulverized shells. The relentless creeping streams continued overwhelming the two huge beasts with sheer force of numbers, flowing up their bodies right to the tips of their golden horns. First the cow, then the King himself, jumped into the pool and vanished into the depths, churning up

whirlpools.

"Now you can run!" urged the snail in Rabbit's pocket, its tiny voice faltering with emotion. "Just... watch your step." The four escapees stumbled and slid their way across the thick carpet of liquefied snail guts, as fast as they could manage over the treacherous surface. The slimy grey mixture quickly filled their shoes to the brim. Reaching the dry stone floor beyond the causeway at last, they set off running in earnest.

Down the five empty entrance halls they fled, dodging a few adventurous lake creatures that tried to block their path. Just as they reached the outer gates, an almighty thundering of hooves behind them indicated that at least one of the buffaloes had escaped the gastropod rebellion. An equally loud, but less describable, torrent of scraping slime made it clear that the snail horde was in hot pursuit. Rabbit jumped on her bicycle outside, which was still encrusted with a few snails; Ninth Goldfish threw his tools on their rack and scrambled onto his own vehicle, Master Ling leaping obligingly on the back.

"Where are we supposed to ride?" asked Rabbit in a panic. The thundering and mass crawling was growing much louder, joined by a roar of rage.

"Right into the water! You'll get used to it!" shouted the Water Agent. Too late; the buffalo pounded to a halt across the threshold mere meters behind them. Rabbit turned to look, expecting a deadly sweep of horns. Instead the Lake King was simply staring at her bicycle in shock, translucent slime dripping from his tragic features.

"Moon Eater, my son!" he cried. "What have they done to you?! The bastards turned you into a..."

At that moment, the wave of uprising snails broke over the Lake King. He smashed into the gates on both sides, sinking under the mass of a million tiny shells. Rabbit and Ninth Goldfish didn't wait around; they rode as fast as they could, bouncing and flying down the rocky tunnel, splashing into the waters of the lake at full speed.

Chapter Sixteen

Rabbit loses another bicycle; for great foot- qi, The travelers pass through Tiger Pawing Spring.

The bobbing flowers and wandering tourists soaked in the sunny breezy afternoon on the South shore of the West Lake between the very short Long Bridge and the shining Leifeng Pagoda. Children bought sesame ice cream, one or two early cicadas began to sing over the background tunes of a piped-in *erhu*, and a young couple posed for wedding photos. Seven old men huddled around a game of unhurried chess, not caring which two were actually playing. Into this idyllic scene emerged Rabbit's bicycle and her companions' garbage carrier, both studded with snails and shedding water. They bounced up onto the white-stone promenade, splashing the chess game, and sped on without a pause. They rode along the lakeside only as far as the next point of exit onto the main road.

"How's the news now?" Rabbit asked the snail in her pocket. "Can we slow down yet?"

"Certainly! I'm pleased to report that our victory has been secured. The casualties were unimaginable on our side, but the Golden Buffalo has at last fallen from the Throne of Harmonious Balance. Our alchemical soldiers have overcome all three buffaloes in the palace--the King, his mate and their daughter--and transmuted them into the forms of three golden lotus plants. These shall be planted on the Three Pools Island with all due respect, and from this day forward the lake shall belong to all who live in it! On behalf of the West Lake community, I thank you, friends! You must come to a formal reception at the palace as soon as we get things straightened out."

"So we can slow down? Good." Rabbit and her followers slowed from the pace of panicked flight to a more reasonable speed. Traffic on the road--mostly tour buses and taxi cabs--was tight. They wound their way through the bottleneck out front of Leifeng Pagoda and continued on down the long stretch between the mountains.

"Nanshan Road turns into Hupao Road just up ahead," Master Ling explained. "Hupao Road runs right between the peaks to the Qiantang River and Six Harmonies. The pagoda is just on the other side of that mountain you can see up ahead."

"About time!" shouted Splinter-of-Jade, clinging to Rabbit's shirt miserably. His left antenna was still bent forward in the middle from his fight with the buffalo.

Moisture evaporated from Rabbit's saturated clothing like bad memories under the warming rays of the sun. She couldn't believe they were so close to her goal. There had been precious few moments throughout the day when it seemed like they had been making any actual progress. Only when she was sitting on Golden Wheel's seat pedaling smoothly, those brief interludes between abductions and battles, did she feel like she was going anywhere at all. She patted the faithful bike's handlebar lovingly.

"So, Miss Snail... or is it Mister?" she started to ask.

"Both," her informant said.

"Oh. Anyway, what was the Old Buffalo saying about his son just before we escaped? Something about my bicycle?"

"Right," said the snail. "I should explain. Remember how I told you we kidnapped Moon Eater, the heir to the lake, and hid him away in a transmuted form?"

"Yes...?"

"Well, the form was that of an old bicycle, and we didn't so much hide him as dump him somewhere in town. We figured he'd get much more lost that way than in some underwater cave. Whoever heard of anyone finding a lost bicycle again? Ha, ha."

She braked and pulled off to the edge of the bike lane, putting both her feet down.

"My Golden Wheel is the buffalo's lost son?!" she said, raising her voice.

"Ahem, it would appear so, if that's what you call the bicycle. You seem to have become quite attached to him."

"Yes!" she practically shouted. "This bicycle is the only good thing that's come out of this cursed Double Nines. It's the greatest bicycle ever built!"

"Not really built," the snail corrected.

"Shut up!"

Ninth Goldfish backed up alongside her. "It's

okay, I'm sure they'll let you keep the bike. Right?"

"Certainly! Consider him your reward for services rendered to the West Lake. His kind isn't needed any longer."

Rabbit relaxed. She really was caught up on Golden Wheel; this adventure would be over soon, and her wonderful machine was the only piece of it she would be able to take back with her to the University. Besides, it was a really, really nice bike.

"Thank you very much," she said to the snail. Then she bowed down and kissed the cycle right between its cold steel handlebars. She sat back up, took a deep breath, and pushed off again. The pedals wouldn't budge.

"Are we finished then?" Ninth Goldfish asked, eager to get moving on the last stretch.

"It won't move," she said, pushing forwards. The wheels were locked to the frame as if they had never before been called upon to turn. "What are you doing?" she shouted at the snail accusingly.

"Nothing!" it shouted back. "He's... reverting."

Her leather seat sank down into Golden Wheel's crossbar, which grew thicker rapidly. The yellow-painted frame rippled and ran like quicksilver, its color changing to gold. The wheels lost their shape; the handlebars stretched away, out of her grasp. The ten or so snails still attached to the frame dropped to the ground, rolling out of the way, as did the snail from Rabbit's pocket. The bicycle grew to a solid mass of gold as long as a car which quickly reformed into a four-legged, horned animal. Rabbit didn't jump off, but stayed balanced on top as her feet were lifted off the ground; this was her bicycle, and she wasn't going to abandon it just because its shape was changing a little. What had once been the handlebars transformed into a pair of majestically curving horns, which swept past her as Sun Eater turned his head.

"Unseat yourself, please," he boomed from deep inside. "I'm not a vehicle of private conveyance anymore."

She slid to the road at his command, then turned around and hugged his neck with joy.

"You're so beautiful now!" she cried. The buffalo prince was small and skinny--comparatively speaking--but his horns curved

high, his large eyes shone bright, and his hide was of less ancient, more polished gold. "Is this what you really look like?"

"Sorry, dear, I need to address my people," the animal whispered in her ear. She let go and skipped back a few steps.

The snails from both cycles gathered in front of Moon Eater, bowing their eye-stalks against the asphalt in a gastropodic kowtow. He raised his mighty horns higher.

"Great Prince Moon Eater, son of the King of the Lake, have mercy on us!" wailed their leader. "As you know, we have plotted against your illustrious family and risen up to destroy your father. This is the responsibility of snail-kind, alone!"

The young bovine's expression softened. "You brought about only that which was destined to happen. The centuries weighed heavily on my father, and he was in need of rest. One King cannot rule for all time. However..." He paused, and the greatly relieved snails leaned forward. "The West Lake must have a Golden Buffalo. That is the way it has always been; Harmonious Balance depends on it. Metal creates Water, for nothing else can."

"It is so. Come back to us, take your place on the throne in your father's palace!" the lead snail shouted with an air of great ceremony. "May you rule justly for another three thousand years!"

"Rule justly, Moon Eater!" chanted the whole group.

"Our blind plans would have led to nothing but disaster without one of your lineage to lead us onwards!" shouted the spokes-snail. "Under your benevolent guidance, we can truly enter a new era of harmony with the people of the city!"

"This is true," admitted the new Lake King. "The time I spent in the city, trapped in the form you forced upon me, was in fact a great help. I know the ways of urban humanity all too well now, from the edge of the Frontier to the towers of downtown. Perhaps I should be grateful for the tribulation; it has made me into a leader with knowledge of lake and city alike, an understanding that my dear father could never hope to reach in his old age." He turned his head to address Rabbit. "And I should certainly be infinitely grateful to you, young

Immortal, for restoring me with the elixir of your kiss. I know why my father snatched you away, and his intentions were well-founded: you are indeed a powerful Immortal whose body contains the force to heal any malady and regenerate life. Thank you."

Rabbit couldn't believe she was crying for her bicycle, but the tears were there to prove it. She ran forward and hugged the bull's neck again. "I'll miss you, down there in the lake. You were the best bike I'll ever have, and a wonderful buffalo too. If I was a cow buffalo, I'd come be your queen." She couldn't believe she was saying *that* either.

"Dear Rabbit, don't take it so hard," he sighed. "We're both Immortals, and Immortals never part for good. If you ever wish to take a break from the surface life for a few years or decades, come on down. The Han officials' palace will be empty now."

She let go of his neck and hopped back. The idea of having that much time on her hands was a little *too* strange to think about, even in this situation.

Rabbit and Ninth Goldfish scooped up the snail subjects and lifted them onto Moon Eater's narrow back. The new Lake King turned back towards the lake and set off up the road, causing a monster traffic jam as he went. Rabbit waved until the procession disappeared behind the bend of the mountain.

"That was disgusting," snorted Splinter-of-Jade, still clinging weakly to her shoulder. "I get myself beat to a pulp rescuing you all from the buffalo, and what do you do? Offer his son and successor a marriage proposal! When will you learn to give ancient monsters a wide berth, Rabbit?"

"Oh, you're just mad because you lost your big fight," she sniped back. "Moon Eater is different."

The cricket chirped indignantly. "You're almost as bad as those snails, killing themselves by the millions to get rid of the King and then kowtowing to the first shiny bovine that comes along. Typical gastropods."

"So, who's hungry?" cut in Master Ling, still perched on the garbage bin of the tricycle. Rabbit glared at him. "No, really," he continued on, "this all happened because you sent us off for food, but in the end you never ate any.

"Don't you want anything now?"

"I'm not hungry anymore," she growled.

"Our criminal friend is right, we do need to start moving on to other matters now," agreed Ninth Goldfish. "We're not *all* immortal here."

"So what?"

"You're not buffalo food anymore; therefore, you still have a job to do. Six Harmonies Pagoda is right behind this mountain."

She sighed. "Right, I'll just ride my bicycle over there and... Oh, no wait, it grew legs and walked off to become a King!"

"Perfect!" exclaimed Splinter-of-Jade.

"I fail to see--"

"No, listen, we're better off walking from here anyway. I just remembered something. The trail over this edge of the mountain is well known to me. It will take us right through Tiger Pawing Spring, my birthplace! We can stop on the way and dip our feet in the stream, gaining some unbeatable foot-*qi*! You never know when that might come in handy--if nothing else, we'll be climbing a lot of stairs when we get to the Pagoda."

"Sounds reasonable to me," agreed Ninth Goldfish. It didn't.

They had to walk a bit further along to reach the entrance to the spring. Between the spot of Rabbit's abandonment and the trail lay Hangzhou Zoo, a medium-sized and not particularly famous zoological park skirting the edge of the mountain. There weren't too many tourists there today, with the probable cause being a hastily-painted sign hanging beside the ticket counter informing visitors that the great pandas were temporarily out of residence. As they passed the main gates, a short man in a blue uniform came rushing out, nearly colliding with the Water Agent's garbage carrier.

"Have you seen any cranes out here?" the man asked frantically, not bothering with apologies.

"No, no we haven't," Ninth Goldfish answered.

"We saw a real mean one up by the West Lake a while ago, but--"

"Too far, too far," said the zoo worker. "They can't get that far with clipped wings."

"So they ran away from the zoo?" the Agent inquired.

"Of course! What do you think, we're just asking around for a few spares? They vanished from the large bird enclosure not fifteen

minutes ago, every last one, not a trace!"

"That's quite unusual. Does this sort of thing happen often?"

"Gah!" shouted the stressed zookeeper, throwing up his hands. He ran up the road to carry on the search. Ninth Goldfish shrugged and continued pushing his cycle along with the others.

The entrance to Tiger Pawing Spring was just beyond the end of the zoo wall. A large arch, a wall of souvenir stalls selling stuffed tigers with electronic voice-boxes and flashing eyes, and a set of public toilets effectively closed off the trail for those without tickets. Ninth Goldfish locked up his vehicle again, but warily brought his weapons along with him. Master Ling paid their way with the change left over from the fateful snack purchase at the lake; Splinter-of-Jade complained incessantly about the commercialization of his birthplace. They walked through the shady groves of ancient trees up to the stream. An artificial pool reflected a false rock carving molded from plaster of an old man sleeping on a ledge, with two huge tigers circling around him.

"That's hideous!" bemoaned the cricket. "A simple mountain spring isn't good enough for anyone anymore. You have to throw in a few features that tourists can take proper photos in front of."

"I don't know, it's pretty cool," commented Rabbit. "What's the story?"

"Eh, it's nothing to buy postcards over. An old monk once ran a monastery up on the mountain, but one year there was supposedly a bad drought. The old guy dreamed about two heavenly tigers being sent up from the South to paw at the ground and dig up a spring. The next morning, there it was. You can draw your own conclusions."

"And we're supposed to stick our feet in?"

"Only if you want to absorb the power of a tiger and turn your feet into mighty claws of death."

The cricket champion jumped from her shoulder into the leaf-littered pond. He sprang back out a moment later, carapace glistening, his energy restored to its usual level and his left antenna miraculously straightened out.

"Ahh, the old taste of home. Ready for action again! I still wouldn't pass up a nap though."

Rabbit, Ninth Goldfish and Master Ling all sat on the edge of the pool, removing their shoes and submerging their aching feet in the cool water. Rabbit could, indeed, almost feel the *qi* flowing into her lower extremities. She washed her socks--which were still soaked anyway--and emptied the caked snail guts out of her shoes as best she could. She might need to go shopping for a new pair when this was over, she noted.

"Foot-*qi* is at a hundred percent," she announced, lacing up her much-lightened shoes. The others followed, and Splinter-of-Jade enthusiastically pointed out the steep trail around the edge of the mountain. At the head of the path stood a massive old camphor tree; on the lowest branch perched a red-headed, snowy-feathered crane.

"Well what do you know, one of the jail-breakers!" observed Master Ling. The bird stared down at them warily. "No point in going back to search for that zookeeper now. Besides, the birds deserve a little vacation."

Splinter-of-Jade shuddered. "Cranes," he commented disparagingly, as if the word itself was a curse.

Chapter Seventeen

In the bamboo forest, an ancestor returns to the family; Splinter-of-Jade fights a duel with a descendant for his standing in the Tiger Pawing Clan.

Beyond the camphor tree, the mountain path entered a slope of thick bamboo. A stream of cold water running straight out of Tiger Pawing Spring followed the trail along, sometimes splashing onto the narrow pavement, sometimes winding away into the woods. The lowering late-afternoon sun strove to sink its rays through the densely packed bamboo shafts, with limited success. Strange, muffled clicking noises drifted between the trunks.

"This is great," Rabbit enthused. "We're so close to the Pagoda now, but I feel like I could walk through this bamboo for hours. It's so calming."

Master Ling had to ruin the moment with a sensible outlook. "I don't know about that.

We're just going to make it before sunset as it is, and I'm getting mighty hungry."

She tried her best to ignore him. "Walking through a bamboo forest has got to be better than getting to the other side of it, no matter what's up there."

"Spoken like a true Immortal!" said Splinter-of-Jade with an amused chirp.

A chirp answered from the forest, then another, and a third.

"Who's out there?" the cricket champion called.

"Tiger Pawing Clan," answered the chirps.

"Why, who are you?"

Splinter-of-Jade hopped with delight. "I'm your old grandpa, you little fools! Have you all forgotten the great champion Splinter-of-Jade?" Instantly, a chaotic chorus of chirps erupted all around them. The group stopped on the path, recognizing when a courtesy visit was unavoidable.

"Since when did crickets live in clans?" Rabbit whispered. "Like bees?"

"By no means!" Splinter-of-Jade answered, sounding hurt. "We're solitary by nature, we don't get along well. That's why we're such good fighters. It's also why we have clans--when populations are high, something needs to keep everyone civil. It's what you call filial piety."

She stifled a laugh. "Crickets are Confucians?"

"Absolutely not! It's just a little bit like that. Ancestor worship is an important part of maintaining civility, but nobody truthfully has any idea who their parents were. It's just generally assumed that crickets in the same area are going to be related one way or another, and should treat each other as kin. It's more ancient than old Master Kong's mess, and works a hell of a lot better. Human childbirth takes all the ambiguity out of relations."

Just then, the chirping subsided and a single cricket, even larger than the Immortal, hopped out of the leaf litter on the path's edge. One of his eyes glowed with a mysterious green light.

"Hello, child," the elder greeted him, switching into the ancestral role with the full force of his charisma.

"Honored, I'm sure," responded the strange local with a hint of sarcasm. "Just passing through then?"

"I'm afraid so. It's always good to see the old mountain again, though."

"So, do you still fight?" the clan-cricket asked, getting right to the point.

The Immortal sized him up. "Are you challenging me?! Who are you, son?"

The young upstart raised his antennae high.

"They call me Radiance. I'm the champion fighter in the clan. I was born under a barrel of chemicals outside the Hangzhou Cigarette Factory on the other side of Jade Emperor Hill; the supernatural elixir made me into a King among crickets. I once took on a magpie and won--the bird only got away with my eye, which I replaced with the electronic eye of a tiger." He flashed the green LED nestled in his eye socket, purloined from one of the stuffed robotic tigers at the souvenir stalls.

Splinter-of-Jade displayed a commendable reluctance to tear the challenger to ribbons.

"That's very interesting. But seriously, I'm *the* Immortal cricket champion of Hangzhou. I've retired from fighting others of my species just today, because there's no challenge in it for me, nor honor. I just fought a duel of single combat with the great Golden Buffalo of the West Lake, the size of a city bus! I don't doubt that you're a skilled fighter, and popular with the ladies, but why do you need to ruin it by taking on a battle you can't win?"

"Listen to this!" marveled the young Radiance.

"Our ancient ancestor can't imagine that any cricket could be as strong as him in this day and age. Science has come a long way since the Song Dynasty, grandpa."

Rabbit could see where this was going; the challenge had become a matter of face. The only way a confrontation could be avoided at this point would be if the younger fighter was given a way to back out without losing precious face. She appointed herself mediator.

"Why do you need to fight jaws-to-jaws about this? A simple contest of strength could settle things well enough without hurting anyone."

"Not at all," Splinter-of-Jade vetoed. His challenger shook his head in like disapproval.

"Fighting isn't all about strength, not by a long shot. It's strategy and careful observation that wins a fight."

"Then play a game of chess or something," Rabbit suggested sarcastically, giving up on the role of insect peacemaker.

"Actually, that's not a bad idea at all," said Splinter-of-Jade. That's right, Rabbit thought,

he would do that--he hadn't mentioned to the challenger that he was one of the original ancient masters of the game.

"Chess, eh?" Radiance pondered, rubbing his legs together. "It's an unusual duel, but I do happen to be a great player, having a more powerful brain than most. Where shall we play?"

Rabbit, Splinter-of-Jade and Ninth Goldfish all turned to Master Ling. The thief shrugged.

"Why are you looking at me? Just because I play a game or two doesn't mean I carry a full set around in my back pocket!" There was a pause while they considered the options.

"I have an interesting idea," offered Radiance with a slightly sinister chirp and a flash of his green eye. "A very interesting one, actually."

Rabbit hadn't noticed at first that the bamboo grove had actually been cultivated intentionally on the de-forested slope, and was thus laid out in neat rows of plants about forty centimeters apart. The bases of the narrow shafts thus formed a clearly visible grid in the empty understory. To add to the effect, the young cricket chose a reasonably flat area straddling the stream; this he chose to serve as the river bisecting the middle of every chess board. Under his direction, they lined up a few stones around a square of four trunks at the back of each side, representing the two facing fortresses. "Now for pieces?" asked Splinter-of-Jade, unclear on his rival's plans.

"Yes, pieces." The young fighter chirped a long and loud battle cry into the surrounding woods; crickets began hopping in from all directions to heed his call. "Here are our pieces." He waited for a nearly complete set of thirty insects, large and small, to congregate.

"As the respected ancestor, you can have first pick."

"It's all the same to me," the elder said with a shrug of his hind legs. "The advantage is all in the mind of the player, not the playing pieces."

"If you say so." He turned to the gathered volunteers. "Line up!"

The crickets hopped around to arrange themselves in front of bamboo stalks in the proper places on the board--five soldiers in front, two cannons behind, and the rest of the army along the rear. Two spots remained empty in the middle of the back rows, inside the two

castles.

"We're the King pieces," Splinter-of-Jade realized. "Very clever." He hopped into position, and his rival did the same. "Wait a second, how can we tell our pieces apart? There are no characters to label them."

"If you forget, just ask. They will remember." The Immortal's army turned around and bowed their antennae to him in a pledge of obedience.

"Fine. Second soldier, you with the black head, forward charge!"

The cricket in question hopped forward to the edge of the stream. Beside Rabbit, Master Ling applauded the opening move. "Excellent! This shouldn't take long at all."

The green-eyed clan-cricket moved one of his own soldiers. Master Ling gasped. "He's good," he whispered loudly.

Splinter-of-Jade brought one of his horse pieces into play, a move that surprised even Rabbit. Master Ling raised a finger and shouted, "That's it! Dragon Horse Tactic! Accept your defeat with honor, novice."

"It's not over till it's over," responded Radiance calmly. "Fourth soldier, forward!"

The soldier piece hopped to the stream's edge opposite the enemy army's own troop.

"What was that?!" cried Splinter-of-Jade in disbelief. "Second soldier, take that piece."

The cricket hopped over the stream into enemy territory in a single bound, landing under the bamboo shaft where his victim sat. The captured piece didn't move.

"You're out!" argued the Immortal's soldier.

"You have to leave the--gyaah!" The enemy pounced, sinking his mandibles into the surprised soldier's unprotected neck. They struggled, chirping battle cries, but the treacherous enemy already had the upper hand. Splinter-of-Jade's game piece lost his head with a *pop* of chitin. The body continued kicking, flopping around in the leaf litter.

"What-- That's just not cricket!" protested the horrified Immortal.

"If you play with real soldiers, you have to expect them to defend themselves," his enemy shrugged. His LED eye flashed bright.

"So be it. This variation should be interesting." He didn't sound as confident as he made out.

The game progressed in earnest, neither general

knowing how each attempted capture would end up. Each time pieces met, a fierce battle to the death would ensue. After a few such confrontations, the visiting player's antennae began to droop. His fighters battled valiantly, much honor being at stake, but the first few fights were won by Radiance's troops. As the board mixed up, Splinter-of-Jade had to ask for the identities of his pieces several times. Rabbit was equally confused, but she could swear some of Radiance's pieces were changing their identities as they moved around. Chariot pieces showed up in spots where she was fairly certain they hadn't been a few turns ago. Under this spurious assault, Splinter-of-Jade's army was soon decimated, though they took a good number of enemies with them along the way. Twitching body parts lay scattered all over the board. The cricket champion didn't try very hard to avoid check, not wanting to sacrifice his descendants in the gruesome game, but his enemy didn't seek to place him in check either. Instead Radiance pursued every last one of his game pieces to the far reaches of the board, hunting them down and destroying them. When Splinter-of-Jade's last castle guard fell after a prolonged duel with an enemy chariot, Radiance still controlled a cannon, two chariots, a horse, both ministers, a trio of soldiers and his castle guards. The chariot piece, breathing heavily from his last kill, had the Immortal in check.

"Fine, I concede, you sick bastard. Good game."

"I said, it's not over till it's over!" chirped the green-eyed maniac. "Chariot, take the king!"

The cricket cautiously charged Splinter-of-Jade, looking for a good opening. The Immortal fended him off with a kick that sent the poor game piece flying against a nearby bamboo trunk; he fell to the ground, twitching in his death throes.

The perverse game continued. The army-less Splinter-of-Jade, trapped in his castle by the king piece's rules of movement, could do nothing but wait for each successive attack. He slaughtered his descendants until no living crickets were left on the battlefield but Radiance and himself.

"Looks like a stalemate," he said in a tired voice.

"It's only a game!" shouted the crazed general triumphantly, leaping out of his castle and across the stream with a series of long jumps.

His green eye blazed like a firework. With antennae held back against his body and fury burning in his own eyes, Splinter-of-Jade met his challenger beside the babbling water. The two crickets locked their mandibles around each other and kicked at the ground. Mud sprayed in all directions. Radiance was stronger than most, but he was indeed only a cricket. After a short, furious match, the young usurper's body rolled into the stream and floated away, kicking and splashing at the water. Splinter-of-Jade stood over the severed head with his antennae bowed to the sides in a tragic stance. The light of the green eye dimmed slowly.

"Descendants," he spat, "who needs them?"

Rabbit walked over and picked up her friend, tears in her eyes. "That mad cricket forced you to kill the whole Tiger Pawing Clan! It wasn't your fault!"

The cricket champion shrugged his hind legs miserably. "I meant what I said, who needs descendants? One thing you have to learn about immortality, Rabbit. Being an Immortal means not needing anyone to remember you after you're gone."

Chapter Eighteen

Six Harmonies are attained at long last; a final ascent is made.

The four travelers passed through the rest of the bamboo forest in silence. Rabbit didn't make any more idle remarks about not wanting to reach the other side; every evenly-spaced patch of trunks now looked like a chessboard, laid out and waiting. She felt much better when the bamboo finally gave way to actual forest, the twisting trees following no human landscaper's pattern. Here they stumbled across three more red-headed cranes digging through the leaf litter, but the birds disappeared into the trees when they saw the intruders. Soon after, the path began to descend. Through the wild foliage the wide expanse of the Qiantang River could be seen glittering in the late afternoon light. At last, the path led down a final set of old stairs to the wide, empty road along the river.

They crossed to the railing along the edge of the concrete cliffs. Empty barges floated in clusters, stationary, on the dark water. Farther up the skeleton-frame of a railroad bridge spanned the significant width, and beyond it, another; the nearer bridge served as a perch for a row of large, suspiciously crane-like silhouettes. On the opposite bank squatted the misty forms of smokestacks. Rabbit didn't need the Water Agent to tell her that smog-shrouded expanse was the Southern Frontier. Ninth Goldfish bowed to the river. "Mighty Dragon of the Qiantang, wash away our troubles," he called out over the water. The sound didn't echo back. Rabbit looked up and down the waterline. "Am I missing something, or was there supposed to be a pagoda around here somewhere?"

"Right up Zhijang Road to the West, just around the bend," said Splinter-of-Jade sullenly. "Great! We're almost there!" she exclaimed, failing to cheer things up. She started walking up the riverside road at a fast pace, and the others followed behind.

For a few minutes nothing could be seen. She was about to ask the cricket whether he was sure about the location when the towering Six Harmonies Pagoda suddenly appeared from behind a fold in the mountain, looming ahead like a vision on top of a small hill. Its thirteen faded rust-red levels were each shaded by a narrow sloping roof, under the eaves of which bronze bells swayed in the breeze. The whole tower was topped by a peaked crown that rose into the sky like a miniature version of the mountain behind. The eight sides of each level were open to the wind with square, black windows. The profile of the long-sought structure surprised Rabbit; it looked nothing like the glittering Leifeng Pagoda on the West Lake, with its glass elevators and strings of colored lights. Six Harmonies was old, built of wood and concrete, the red paint running off and the pottery roof tiles crumbling. Suddenly, she didn't relish the prospect of climbing the tower.

"How old is that thing?" she asked.

"It gets rebuilt and renovated all the time," Splinter-of-Jade answered, still sounding miserable. "I don't remember when the most recent work was done on it, but it's long overdue for a new coat of paint."

They passed through the parking lot, which was already empty of tour buses, and reached the stairs leading up the side of the low hill. A ticket counter manned by a joyless old lady demanded a twenty-*yuan* ticket purchase to enter the park. Rabbit pulled out her billfold and pried out the pulpy, lake-soaked mass that had been her *majiang* winnings. She managed to peel off one salvageable hundred-*yuan* note from the lump, which she smoothed out on the counter and handed to the ticket lady. She was given three tickets, a partially torn ten *yuan* note, and a scowl in return. "Better hurry up, it closes in less than an hour," the old lady warned. Rabbit took the tickets and sprinted up the stairs, her companions following behind.

The park surrounding the pagoda was well-landscaped and planted with a whole spectrum of cheerful flowers, but they didn't have any interest in such things any more. The stairs awaited. Reaching the entrance of the tower, they realized to their dismay that another ten-*yuan* ticket was required to enter the building itself; the first ticket had only been for the surrounding park. Rabbit groaned. A typical Tourism Bureau extortion measure. She threw the sodden pink mass of remaining hundred-*yuan* notes down on the counter and they ran inside before the man could protest. Around the inner circular hallway they searched for the stairwell. It finally appeared inside a gap in the central column, spiraling upwards unevenly. Rabbit took a deep breath.

"Well, it took way, way too long, but here we are. Time to figure out what the big secret is." She placed her foot on the first warped stair, covered up under an ugly green carpet. *One*. Up she climbed on the uneven wooden stairs, counting as she went with head bowed, her companions following behind. Two, three, four five six, seven eight nine, teneleventwelve thirteen, fourteenfifteensixteenseventeeneightennineteen. The stairs ended at the first floor. She looked up.

Seven men, their features ranging from youthful to very ancient--in some cases on the same face--stood along the edge of the tower, looking out the windows over the river. They wore ridiculously antique robes like opera costumes

and held strange instruments. Their hands and heads were covered with short brown fur, like monkeys. *Oh no*, Rabbit thought, *cosplayers, here?* One of the younger strangers leaned on a jewel-encrusted sword and smiled.

"You know what's really interesting about this pagoda?" he asked Rabbit.

* * * * *

Many, many centuries ago, before any of the great battles were fought, before the First Emperor of Qin unified the Middle Kingdom, before the *Analects* were written, before the people sang the *Odes* or even the *Earth-Pounding Song*, before the legendary sage-kings, the floods, Yu the Great and the Yellow Emperor, lived Prince Millet.

*Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two
threefourfivesixseveneightnine...*

As everyone knows, it was Prince Millet who first discovered how to farm the land. He cleared the land outside his hut, plowed the soil by hand, and planted the first grains of millet and sorghum in the Earth there. As he had hoped, the seeds soon sprouted. He watched the plants grow green and tall and the heads of fat grain ripen. He chased the birds away with stones all day long, and slept soundly at night. Pleased by his efforts, the Dragon King brought just the right amount of rain to water the crops. The Prince harvested the grain in the autumn and rejoiced in the bounty. This we all know.

*Thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two
threefourfivesixseveneightnine...*

That autumn, an ancient crane roosted on the mountain above Prince Millet's hut. Just as Prince Millet was the ancestor of all the farming people of the Middle Kingdom, Snow Feathers was the ancestor of all cranes. He was a big strong crane, with feathers of pure white and a beak like a sword. He flew all over the land, fishing in the rivers and ocean, taking insects, berries and seeds wherever he found them. But

when he saw Prince Millet harvesting the fat heads of grain and threshing them into big hemp baskets, he felt a great hunger that he knew no amount of foraged berries would be able to satisfy.

Forty, forty-one, forty-twothreefourfivesixseveneightnine...

The great bird flew down from the mountain and bowed to Prince Millet, who looked up from his threshing basket. "My dear friend," Snow Feathers said politely, "The weather grows cold and the wind harsh. Now is the time when we most need hearty food to give our bodies sustenance, but this is also the time when berries start to disappear off the bushes and insects burrow deep underground. How could this happen all at once? Those who speak of the Way and balance in all things must live only in the summer."

Prince Millet shook his head. "This may be the case for you, master bird, but as you can well see I have found the ways of agriculture. From this year forth, my kind shall harvest their food right when it is most needed, and store it through the long winter months. This is what is meant by the Way."

"But I have not plowed any fields, and how can I with these wings of mine?" lamented the crane. "Please let me have some of your bounty of grain to preserve me through the cold."

"No!" shouted the Prince, picking up a stone and raising it as if to throw. "I have spent many days standing guard over this field, keeping away the blackbirds and pheasants. Why should I give you a share just because you ask politely? Get lost!"

Fifty, fifty-one, thirty-twothreefourfivesixseveneightnine...

Snow Feathers flew away over the mountain, still trying to think of a way to get his talons on some of the grain. He perceived that the only way Prince Millet would part with his harvest would be if it was traded for something of equal worth. The crane had no idea what this could be, however. Not very many things were as valuable as nutritious food in those days. He continued flying far away towards the East, reasoning that the most valuable items in Prince Millet's eye would be something he had never encountered before in his region.

Sixty, sixty-one, twothreefourfivesixseveneightnine...

The crane flew all the way to the shores of the Eastern sea without finding any suitable treasures. On the sandy shore he alighted, afraid to fly any farther East over the wild windy sea. There, a tiny sandpiper dug holes in the water margins.

"What are you digging for, little master bird?" Snow Feathers asked.

"I'm looking for cowries to eat," said the sandpiper, a little startled.

"What sort of food is that?" the crane wondered.

"Dig for yourself, and you shall see," suggested the sandpiper.

Snow Feathers stuck his long, sword-like beak far into the sand and dug until he brought up a tiny white shell, shaped like a little fruit pointed on both ends. The hungry little sandpiper rushed up and pulled a pink creature out of the shell, swallowing it whole.

"What do you do with the shell?" questioned the crane, eyeing the bright object, which was the same snow-white as his own feathers.

"Nothing, of course. It's just trash. The ocean will wash it away."

The crane picked up the shell in his beak and flew away to the West, leaving the little sandpiper alone on the shore.

Seventy, seventy-one, twothreefourfivesixseveneightnine...

Snow Feathers flew back along his route to find Prince Millet's home again. The man was still threshing his red sorghum. He shouted at the bird to leave his crops alone, and threw stones at him.

"Wait," said the crane, "I wish to make an offer. I have a valuable treasure to trade for just one little basket of your grain." He set the white shell on the ground at the Prince's feet.

"What is this?" wondered Prince Millet.

"This is a cowry shell from the distant Eastern sea," said the crane grandly. "It is a most rare and desirable possession."

"It's very strange, but what is its use?" the man asked.

"This item will get you anything in the world. Because of its rarity and worth, other people will desire it as you do. You can trade it to them

in exchange for beautiful clothing, tools and weapons, or even *five* baskets of grain!"

Eighty, eighty-onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnine...

Ninety, ninety-onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnine...

Prince Millet stared at the cowry shell, captivated. "So I could trade one basket of sorghum to you for this shell, and then I could trade the shell for *five* baskets?"

"That's right," said the crane. "I could trade it for five myself, but I'm hungry right now so I'm willing to make a deal."

The man was unconvinced. "I've never heard of such a thing. It's such a small shell, and it doesn't look very special."

"Ah well," sighed the crane, picking up the shell and pretending he wasn't interested anymore, "I guess I'd better keep it to myself then. I need to go dig for grubs in the woods."

"No, wait!" shouted Prince Millet.

One hundred and...

onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnine...

The Prince gave Snow Feathers a whole basket of sorghum out of his storage pit before he could threaten to take away the shell again. The gleeful crane flew off to the mountain peak with the basket grasped in his mighty talons, laughing all the way.

One-ten, one-

eleventwelve thirteenfourteenfifteensixteenseventeneighteen nineteen...

Prince Millet stuck the cowry shell under the band of his hat, where it stayed until the following year, when he set out to teach the other people his method of farming. While showing other families how to till the soil, he also showed them the cowry and told them of its great rarity and value. By the following Autumn, the shell was in such high demand that Prince Millet didn't even bother to plant another crop. He simply traded it to another family for twelve baskets of grain. Soon the people started sending expeditions to the distant sea to gather more of the shells, and some of them became very wealthy. Thus the first system of money began.

One-twenty, onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnine...

Prince Millet himself died a poor man after the Great Sichuan Basin Jade Bubble of 2513, but his first cowry shell continued to be passed around through countless transactions. It soon gained a reputation as a powerful charm of wealth--which it most certainly was, being the root of all money. Its power to control the flow of wealth grew over the millennia along with the increasing sway of money over the lives of humanity, until entire dynasties could rise and fall on its influence. The First Emperor of Qin owned it, and had it sealed it inside a golden boat-shaped ingot marked with the character for 'cowry'. Most successive Imperial dynasties thereafter held the ingot in their treasuries.

One-thirty... one-forty... one-fifty... one-sixty...

Soon after the start of the Northern Song Dynasty, the cowry fell out of the Imperial grasp for a time. It ended up in the hands of King Qian Liu of the United States of Wu and Yue, whose capitol was in Hangzhou. When the King built the Six Harmonies Pagoda, it wasn't just to tame the Qiantang River's infamous tidal bore through a display of his power, as was popularly believed. He also sealed the cowry ingot inside the central column at the top of the tower, allowing its beneficial energy to spread over the entire city. Thus the city rose to unmatched prosperity, soon thereafter becoming the Imperial capital of the Southern Song.

One-seventy... one-eighty... one-ninety...

When Hangzhou was taken by the Mongols, the pagoda was destroyed. Through the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties the cowry was lost, buried in the ruins of the original pagoda underneath later structures. Only much later, when the most recent round of renovation was done in the 1930s, was it uncovered. Certain elements who understood the significance of the relic discovered it in the collection of the Provincial Museum in the late 1970s and had it reinstated at the top of the tower. Again its power spread on the winds.

Two hundred and...
onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnine...

Now more powerful than ever, Prince Millet's cowry spread its wealth-giving influence over the entire Eastern coast as the importance of money likewise grew. The economists and politicians debated endlessly on the reasons for all the newfound prosperity, oblivious to the influence of the relic.

Two hundred and ten.

* * * * *

"Two hundred and ten!" Rabbit shouted triumphantly, standing on the top step of the pagoda. The oddly-dressed stranger turned around and stared at her.

"Excuse me?"

"Six Harmonies Pagoda has two hundred and ten steps!" she announced again, beaming.

The strange furry man shook his head in vexation. "Were you listening to a word I was saying, Immortal Woman He? The steps don't add up to a thing! Numerology is bunk."

Chapter Nineteen

Much truth is revealed beside the Qiantang River; Rabbit accepts her destiny with surprisingly little hesitation.

Rabbit stood aside to let her friends and the remaining six strangers come up the stairs, speechless for a good twenty seconds.

"Immortal Woman He?" she whispered.

"Aha! Sea cucumber!" exclaimed Master Ling. "I knew you people looked familiar. I've eaten you all!"

There was a moment of silence. Splinter-of-Jade chirped.

"What your gourmet friend is referring to," explained the man with the sword, "is one of the most lamentable culinary excesses of neo-Confucian cuisine, the dish known as 'Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea Gamboling Around the Arhat'. It's a ridiculous concoction of eight ingredients--shark fin, sea cucumber, abalone, fish bladder, shrimp, ham, asparagus and white croaker meat--carefully arranged around a whole chicken. It supposedly tells the story of our adventures swimming across the East Sea led by a Buddhist saint. I never did know which one I was supposed to be--I fear the asparagus--but I do believe your friend is right about you being the sea cucumber. I'm sorry, such is the price of fame."

"So," Rabbit said slowly, "I'm the Immortal Woman He, and you guys are the other legendary Eight Immortals. Weird. I thought we lived a really long time ago."

The stranger didn't even dignify her comment with a response.

"Psst," Splinter-of-Jade whispered, "you're *Immortals*. Figure it out."

"Oh! I see. Heh."

"Are you sure you're okay with that?" asked the stranger, his voice showing concern. "Not feeling any inner turmoil or anything?"

"Nope. the Immortal Woman is cool! I've always liked her stories. My stories, rather."

The cricket stifled a chirp. "I'll bet you didn't read the story about how you *became* immortal!"

Indeed, she couldn't quite remember that one. "Something about eating a peach?" she guessed. "Hah! A peach! That's a good one."

The Immortal with the sword turned distinctly red. "I'll tell you later," he said. "There are more important matters to discuss right now."

He walked up to the southernmost window, overlooking the golden Qiantang River and the hazy Frontier beyond.

"Now that your true identity has been established, you're probably wondering about the sequence of events that led to your current amnesia and the adventures of the day."

"No, actually I'm just wondering what the *fuck* is going on. It's more general than that."

The man winced. "Fine, that's fair. Let's get some wine here."

One of the Immortals unslung a gourd of wine from over his shoulder and passed it to the leader. In contrast to the other magnificent beings, he was old, bony, wrinkled, and covered in disgusting sores peeking through his sparse fur. He was dressed in rags and leaned on a crutch of cast iron. This was the famous Iron-Crutch Li, Rabbit realized. She began to feel a little star-struck for the first time. The man she was talking to, with the scholar's robe and double-edged sword--that was Lu Dongbin, the most famous Immortal of all! She looked around as Dongbin took a swig and passed the gourd. There was Zhongli Quan, the elder of the group, with his feathered fan and huge bare belly hanging out over his belt. Behind him stood the young Philosopher Han Xiang, twirling his flute idly. The old, bearded Royal Uncle Cao held his trademark wooden castanets and jade tablet of Imperial lineage. Cao passed the wine to a young scholar of indeterminate gender, wearing an overly thick wool coat and one shoe, with a short hoe and basket of flowers slung over his shoulder. That must be Lan Caihe, the subject of centuries of debate on his true sex. Meeting him in person did nothing to settle matters. That left only the bearded man at the top of the stairs. The individual in question pulled a piece of paper out from under the band of his hat and started to unfold it. It grew to fill the whole narrow hallway, taking the form of a white donkey. The Immortal climbed on the animal's back facing the wrong way and leaned back, patting its head.

"Might as well get comfortable for this," said Elder Zhong Guo, for it was he.

Rabbit turned down the offered wine jug. "Alright, let's have it."

"Well, it's kind of a funny story really," Lu Dongbin laughed nervously. "A few decades back was your one thousandth birthday. The gang wanted to throw you a surprise party to end all surprise parties back on Penglai Mountain, but being such a notable anniversary it was clear you would suspect we were up to something. We had to be especially sneaky about it. After much deliberation I finally hit upon a plan: I would take a quick trip down to the Underworld and borrow an elixir of amnesia from the Bureau of Processing Memories of Past Lives. That way, you would forget *everything*, including your birthday, until our preparations for the party were complete. I traveled down to the Bureau and convinced the Judge of Memory, Recollection and Deja Vu to part with a Potion of Memory Annihilation. He warned me that it was powerful, but claimed that a small quantity would only last for a short time. I snuck a spoonful of the powder into your wine jar the evening before your birthday. It would have worked perfectly, but we had actually fooled you too well. Convinced we had all forgotten the occasion, you became depressed and drank yourself to sleep, draining your entire stock of wine. The overdose of Memory Annihilation Potion caused you to actually leave your body and return to the Great Wheel of Transmigration. It took us many years and countless trips to the Bureaus of the Underworld to discover where they were reassigning you, and by the time we found out you had already been reincarnated in a small town in Zhejiang Province. We checked in on you from time to time, horrified by the results of our prank gone awry, but we could do nothing; the officials of Hell were very clear on the fact that nothing could be done to restore memories from previous lives. Strictly against the regulations of Universal Dao, they said.

"So for these past long decades, the legendary Eight Immortals have been only seven. We wandered the Earth as in past ages, but it just wasn't the same. Finally, certain developments--of which you shall soon hear--made it

absolutely imperative that we restore our little band to completeness. So here we are to welcome you back." He raised his hands and smiled. "Surprise!"

Ninth Goldfish cut in before the stunned Rabbit could respond to the offer. "Why don't you ask her whether she *wants* to be your Woman He?"

"It sounds cool..." she started to say.

"What if she isn't?" the Water Agent carried on.

"What if she'd rather just be Rabbit? What if she *likes* being an ordinary student at Zhejiang University? You have no right to tell her who she is and demand that she leave behind..."

"Okay. *Okay!*" she shouted, silencing her friend.

"Zhejiang University isn't really all that great. I can't stand architecture. Being the Immortal Woman sounds pretty good to me."

"Immortals simply cannot live in the mortal world for long," Lu Dongbin stated, smiling.

"We have to rise above it sooner or later. Such is the Way. And that's another thing about us, we're people of the Way; we follow our destiny with less complaints than mortal men, having a better innate feeling for the Universal Dao."

"Of course, the wine doesn't hurt either," added Splinter-of-Jade.

The seven Immortals laughed at his joke, breaking out the calabash again. This time, Rabbit accepted it, taking a tiny sip from the gourd. It tasted like liquid sunlight.

"Okay, you've got me," Rabbit said, laughing along with them. "With only two demands. Firstly, I may be Immortal, but I'm not He. She's dead. I'll be known from now on as Immortal Woman Rabbit. Secondly, He's emblem, the reed ladle full of fruit and flowers? *Lame*. The worst of the bunch. Instead I will be known by my Immortal companion, the Cricket Champion."

"Fine, fine!" the seven Ancients applauded.

"That's assuming I want to tag along with you crazy people," Splinter-of-Jade protested.

"Oh come on, it's the Way," she chided, patting his antennae.

Ninth Goldfish waved his broom handle for silence. "As long as we're all expositing here, why not tell us why the good Master Ling and myself are here? We're not Immortals too, are we?"

"Don't rush me, I was getting to that!" Lu

Dongbin said. "So, back to the story. We needed to bring Immortal Woman He--I mean, Rabbit--back into the gang, but we couldn't just show up at the University and drop all this on her. She had to learn about the world on her own first. So we arranged for her to journey across the city and the West Lake on Double Nines, having a good notion that things would get crazy along the way."

"I played the part of Professor Xian," interjected Elder Zhong Guo proudly from atop his paper donkey.

"Yes. And we made absolutely certain that you would find adventure by teaming you up with our young insect friend here."

"I was the trainer you threw out the window," Royal Uncle Cao confided to Splinter-of-Jade.

"That was good fun."

"And then I wrecked your bicycle," laughed the young Philosopher Han Xiang.

"Indeed. After that, we just sat back and watched the fun. We all agree that you and the friends you picked up handled yourselves quite well, all things considered. And at the end of the day, you have enough wild experiences under your belt that you should find the life of the Eight Immortals downright restful."

Rabbit glared at him. "Just you wait till *your* next birthday," she warned ominously.

"It's getting late," reminded the odd little Lan Caihe in an androgynous voice. Lu Dongbin looked out the window behind him; the heavy orange sun was indeed sinking into the smoggy morass of the Frontier across the river.

"So it is. Time is short. How about another round of wine?"

Zhongli Quan hopped up from where he was sitting propped on the adjacent windowsill, waving Lu Dongbin away with his trademark feathered fan. The old, pot-bellied immortal, the elder of the group and its titular leader, took his student's place at the south wall.

"Get away, you young slacker! I forget why I ever bothered enlightening you sometimes. Pardon me, Immortal Woman Rabbit. Despite my pupil's carefree act, there are serious matters afoot. I hope you were paying attention to the story of Prince Millet's cownose shell that Dongbin told on the way up here."

"I got the general gist of it."

"Well, that little shell is why we're all here this

evening. We Immortals are famous for staying out of the affairs of the mortal world, but we had to make an exception for this." He gestured out the window. "Have a look."

Rabbit walked up to the Southern window and leaned out, looking down. The garden surrounding Six Harmonies Pagoda was cast in darkness, all color drained out of the flowerbeds. The sun was setting over the Frontier, but it wasn't *that* low yet. Big white drops like heavy milky rain fell past the seventh-story portal. Splinter-of-Jade gasped on her shoulder. Rabbit looked upwards. A slowly spinning wheel of black and white cranes, like a galaxy of birds, rotated in the sky over the tower. A few last stray birds were flying in from all directions to join in the huge flock as it wheeled ceaselessly, not a single detectable sound drifting downwards.

Chapter Twenty

Immortals and heroes fight for Prince Millet's cowry shell; a long day's journey leads into the night.

"Oh shit, that's a lot of cranes!" Rabbit exclaimed, ducking back inside. Her two mortal companions rushed to take a look for themselves, gasping. "What are they all doing here?"

Lu Dongbin threw up his hands in frustration. "I knew you weren't listening to my story! They're here for the cowry shell, of course!" Splinter-of-Jade's antennae sprang up. "They want it back?"

The elder Zhongli Quan answered with a slap of his fan on his great belly. "That's right. Their homes and hunting grounds are being destroyed by human development all up and down this region, and they've only recently uncovered the reason behind it. The word is that their King and ancestor, Snow Feathers, is still around and dwells on Nine Dragon Mountain not far from Hangzhou, but he's gone a bit senile in the past thousand years or so. In his dotage he forgot all about the trickery of his younger days, until a few days ago, when a dream came to him

reminding him of the episode with Prince Millet. Some diligent research on the part of his scholars--Sima Chien's *Coded Annals*, and whatnot--eventually brought to light the life and times of the cowry shell, along with its current whereabouts in this pagoda. So here they are to take it back."

"But it was given away in a fair trade!" the cricket objected. "I thought that was the whole point--it's the root of commerce. I don't imagine old Snow-Tail still has that basket of sorghum lying around on his mountain."

"Exactly. That's why he figured it would be helpful to have an army of every crane in China behind him."

"And we're here to fight them off?"

"Now you've got it!"

"So much for not intervening in the mortal world."

"We may not be mortals," Lu Dongbin cut in, "but we are humans, and we have some interest in the continued existence of our race. In the beginning, cranes and people were the two strongest beings in the Middle Kingdom, and the only two candidates for dominance. Snow Feathers thought he was the smooth salesman, but in truth he paid dearly for his meal. The power of the cowry shell gave humankind the edge we needed to come out on top. As powerful as it has become these days, if it fell back under their wings it would give them a chance at taking our throne."

The gathering was silent for a moment, contemplating the gravity of the situation at hand in the dim light filtering through the windows. Suddenly, Elder Zhong Guo laughed heartily and slapped his paper donkey.

"Don't believe a word of it! We just can't resist a good old-fashioned fight, and we haven't seen one of those in far too long."

Zhongli Quan raised his fan for silence again. "Enough idle chat. The birds are getting restless. Let's talk strategy." The old man, Rabbit remembered, was the military commander of the group. "Most importantly, we should take the fight to the birds, not wait here for them. Divide and conquer, and don't let them get too close in to the tower. Everyone have a good swig of wine." Iron-Crutch Li unslung his calabash again and cheerfully complied, passing the gourd to Rabbit

afterwards. She raised an eyebrow. "Penglai Mountain's Cloud-Somersault Rice Wine, famous across Heaven and Earth. One gulp will have you high as a kite in no time!" She took a mouthful and swallowed it. Her whole body tingled. Splinter-of-Jade didn't wait for an offer; he hopped right inside the open mouth of the gourd. A laughing chirp echoed out, followed by the cricket himself. He floated around the ceiling of the tower in a complete circuit, chirping in delight, before settling back on Rabbit's shoulder. She handed the calabash to Ninth Goldfish. He drank, squinted, and handed it to Master Ling. The old thief took the vessel reverently.

"I'd rather eat a whole dish of Guerilla Chicken on an empty stomach than fly out there and fight that horde of cranes, but even Guerilla Chicken is bearable with a good bottle of wine!" He took a long drink, closing his eyes in rapture. "Ooooh, tangy!" Iron-Crutch Li took his calabash back and slung it over his shoulder. He rapped his cast-iron crutch on the floor.

"Ready to go? I may be slow on the ground, but up in the sky I don't have to use my crutch to walk, so it's free to brain some birds."

"Who needs a weapon? I'm such a legendary fighter I have a whole school of *wushu* named after me," boasted Elder Zhong Guo, "and my donkey's no slouch either!"

"My wooden clappers aren't just for playing a rhythm," shouted the Royal Uncle Cao.

"I'm well known for charming the birds out of the trees with my flute music," added the young Philosopher Han Xiang. "What better weapon could a general hope for in a battle such as this?"

"My basket may be full of flowers, but it hangs from a deadly iron hoe!" offered the mysterious Lan Caihe.

"I wield my double-edged sword with such skill," shouted Lu Dongbin, raising the blade, "that swordsmen don't dare take me as their patron--barbers do!"

"The wind from my fan can sweep away an Imperial fleet on the high seas! What chance do a bunch of birds in the air have?" boasted Zhongli Quan.

Splinter-of-Jade caught on. "I'm the champion fighter of the Southern Song, Liao, Jin, Ming and Qing! My mandibles are made of iron and my kicking legs of stone! And I hate cranes as

only a cricket can!"

"My Water Agent's broom and dust-pan are made for controlling wild Earth," Ninth Goldfish carried on, "But they can sweep up feathers just as well!"

"I've never tasted crane before, but now that I can fly, I intend to have a meal before the night is up!" Master Ling shouted.

Rabbit looked around for inspiration. "I'll just go out there and break some beaks!" she promised. "I don't know how, but I will!"

With a shout and a twirl of his sword, Lu Dongbin turned and leapt out the window, vaulting into thin air. The others followed through various portals. Splinter-of-Jade sprang off Rabbit's shoulder and made a beeline for the sky, battle-chirping madly. She sighed and climbed out after the group, tiptoeing across the air a few steps before sailing off to catch up with her companions.

The wheeling mass of silent birds looked like a torrential whirlpool from below. The twelve fighters--nine immortals, two mortals, and a paper donkey--rose up into the storm, separating as they cleared the mountain-tops and attacking the closely-packed birds from six points below. The silent flock erupted with surprised screeching that echoed from the peaks below, breaking apart into chaos in a half-dozen places. Rabbit tried to stay close to Splinter-of-Jade, or rather the flurry of black-and-white feathers that marked his location. She swung at the birds as they retaliated, grabbing two by their red-topped heads, one in each hand, and wielding the two hapless avians like flails. The furious birds attacked her face and arms with their sword-like beaks and long talons, but her immortal flesh provided all the armor she needed to feel safe--almost. Blinded by feathers, she soon lost track of any of her companions. All at once, a mighty blast of wind cleared the air around her; she fought to maintain her footing on the atmosphere. It was much easier to see now, above the birds. Zhongli Quan, waving his mighty fan, was a tiny figure in the distance to the North. "Thanks!" she shouted at him, and looked around for Splinter-of-Jade. The cricket champion was nowhere to be seen. She located Ninth Goldfish and Master Ling, fending off a score of birds not far below her, and flew to their aid instead. She battled

through the squawking cranes with her flails to reach her friends' side.

"Are you two doing okay? No offence, but you're the only two ordinary mortals here. Be careful."

"No problem," the bicycle thief shouted, twirling a dead crane showily. "These birds look pretty mortal to me too."

The Water Agent didn't look so confident. "I'm afraid I'm out of my element here. It's the Pagoda." He pointed down at the octagonal top of the tower. "Six Harmonies was built by that ancient King to control Water. It's blocking up my *qi*."

"I'll see what I can do," Rabbit promised, and took off again. "Bash on regardless!"

She headed up again, smacking cranes out of the air as she passed, looking for one of the other Immortals. She came across a mass of struggling, screeching birds; beating them away from their adversary, she uncovered the strange little scholar Lan Caihe.

"Thanks, friend!" the scholar said, a flower basket clutched in one fist and a bloody hoe in the other.

"Miss... ter..." she began, "Uh, friend Lan, do you think you could do something about the Pagoda?"

"Why, are the cranes trying to storm it?" zie asked, glancing down.

"No, actually I was hoping we could, you know, knock it down. It's causing some *qi* issues." She shrugged hopefully.

"Sure, I'll get right on it!" zie shouted enthusiastically, swooping into a dive with her single shoe flapping behind. Rabbit fought her way through another dense flock, the beady yellow eyes and snapping beaks coming fast and thick. After she cleared it out, sending the last two birds fleeing for their lives, she looked down. The limp white bodies of the fallen spun Earthwards like grim snow; below, the Six Harmonies Pagoda was beginning to lean to one side. A monumental roaring crash drifted upwards above the peaks as the old tower fell to the undermining assault of the little Immortal's hoe. Ninth Goldfish and Master Ling drifted up beside Rabbit; the Water Agent twirled his broom and dust-pan expertly.

"That was quick! Pity about the tower, but it can stand being rebuilt one more time."

"I guess so."

Another roaring sound drifted up, louder than the collapsing tower, but different. It took them a moment to realize it was coming from the river. The golden waters parted, rocking boats up and down the shore, as a monster serpent like a scaly freight train shot out from beneath the surface. A mane flowed from its head and down its back, and its two trailing whiskers flapped in the wind.

"Dragon!" shouted the Water Agent, awestruck. "What's going on?"

The mythical beast rose into the air to their level, placing its enormous thousand-fanged face in front of the three stunned fighters. Cranes fled from the general area in panic, going after easier prey.

"Thank you, my faithful Agent, and thank you, Immortal Woman."

"For what?" Rabbit managed to squeak.

"King Qian Liu's accursed Pagoda has restrained me and my river at this spot for centuries. It always feels good to be rid of it, if only for a short time. Now I, too, can join in your battle here, though the cranes are not my enemies."

"We would be much obliged if you would," entreated the Water Agent, kowtowing in thin air.

The Dragon of the Qiantang River wheeled around without another word and sped its massive bulk off towards the North, cranes fleeing before his jaws.

Rabbit cheered. "Now we've got something going! Let's get back into the fight! Has anyone seen Splinter-of-Jade?"

"Look for the thickest part of the battle," suggested Master Ling.

They rose up higher over the mountains, following the thickest, most chaotic knots of screeching cranes. They fought their way through one mob, finding Iron-Crutch Li within, his crutch and rags covered in blood.

"Thanks, that was about all I could handle. Are we making progress?"

Rabbit surveyed the chaotic evening skies, still white with cranes in places. "Not much. They're dropping like flies, but we're fighting every single crane in China here! This could take all night."

"Well I'm glad to report, more help is on the way!" cried Master Li. "Look down there, towards the lake!"

Something else was floating up over the mountains from the West Lake. It glittered against the shadowy forests below, large and four-legged.

"Moon Eater!" Rabbit fairly screamed. The golden buffalo soared up at the sound of her voice; she hugged her friend's neck.

"I didn't expect to see you again *quite* so soon, Rabbit! So where are these birds I hear about?"

"You never told me you could fly!" she exclaimed.

"I couldn't, until your energetic cricket friend and a young flautist came around to my palace just now to deliver some excellent wine."

She looked at Iron-Crutch Li; he shrugged. His calabash of Penglai Mountain Cloud-Somersault Rice Wine was gone from his shoulder. "They wanted to go collect some friends," he explained.

The conversation didn't go any farther--a horde of flying foes descended on them, screeching to high Heaven. The confusion of combat began again. Rabbit tried to stay close to her mortal friends and protect them from the lethal beaks and claws. The flurry of wings and beaks only grew thicker and thicker, threatening to smother them. She fought frantically, swinging two birds from each fist, but felt like she was drowning in a sea of feathers and knives.

All at once, the deafening screeching increased by a few decibels and the smothering horde broke apart, dead white forms plummeting into the treetops below. The golden buffalo floated nearby, three birds impaled on his curved horns; Iron-Crutch Li smacked at a straggler to his left. Master Li and Ninth Goldfish leaned on each other, clearly in pain--though all of them were so covered in blood, it was difficult to tell for sure how badly they were wounded. Splinter-of-Jade zipped past, cursing at the fleeing birds.

"Come back and fight, you great chickens!"

"Old Cricket! Where were you?" she called. He followed a wide arc and returned.

"I went to gather some friends. Looks like I came back just in time, too. I called on your favorite metal bovine, and then sallied over to the North Peak to wake up the old codgers of the Purple Palace School of *Wushu*. Master

Phoenix and the boys are somewhere off to the West with Elder Zhong Guo now, causing a great deal of harm to the enemy."

"Well, it took you long enough. Look out above, here comes the next bunch!"

More snow-white, blood-red fighters descended on them, screaming death cries.

Together they fought their way through that flock, and the next. The skies between the river and the Southern lakeshore finally began to clear. The last remnants of China's crane population circled cautiously, afraid to attack alone. As they began cheering in victory, an almighty roar drifted across from the direction of the riverside: "The Pagoda! Now!"

They soared at top cloud-somersaulting speed to the fresh ruins of the destroyed tower. The dragon hovered over it, waiting for the other fighters to gather. A single large crane, pure white, was picking through the debris on the ground. Rabbit floated up beside Zhongli Quan, her eyes questioning.

"Snow Feathers," he explained, looking grave.

"That's no ordinary crane. He's older than any of us, including the Dragon."

Splinter-of-Jade alighted on Rabbit's shoulder.

"I could take him," he said. "Crickets and cranes don't get along too well. It's my duty."

"I don't think that's a very--" Rabbit started to say, before realizing that the cricket was gone. She dropped lower, fearing the worst.

Snow Feather painstakingly sifted through the rubble along the central column of the former Pagoda in search of his prize. Finally, lifting up shattered porcelain tiles at what had been the apex of the roof, he uncovered the high end of the concrete column that had supported it. In a hollow atop the cracked column, the grandfather of all cranes found the boat-shaped golden ingot marked with the character for 'cowry'. He raised his beak, filling the twilight with his cry of victory. Splinter-of-Jade soared out of the semi-darkness and pummeled the side of his ancient head with a stone-crushing kick, snapping his serpentine neck to one side. He straightened up and screeched again, this time in fury. The cricket and the crane began their battle, shaking the unsettled rubble on the hilltop. Splinter-of-Jade got in a few good kicks, but the five-thousand-year-old crane was more

powerful than he had imagined. Snow Feather swiped with the precision of a master swordsman, finally slinging the cricket skyward after three stabbing blows.

Splinter-of-Jade reached the top of his trajectory and fell again, unconscious. Lan Caihe swooped in and caught the insect in his basket of flowers. Zie flew over to Rabbit, holding out her friend. She picked up the tiny, still form, her heart in her throat.

"Why did he go and do that? Not even the Dragon would fight that crane!"

Lu Dongbin descended to face her, his bloodstained, double-edged sword over his shoulder.

"This cricket is indeed a champion of legendary power, almost worthy of taking on Snow Feathers. His tiny body is well fortified by the alchemical agents, and his *qi* is well cultivated. But he isn't fully Immortal like we are. Only the elixir of pure, everlasting *yang* can bring him to his full potential."

The cricket twitched an antenna. "I know all about you and your elixirs, you dirty, dirty man," he groaned.

Lu Dongbin looked to the skies. "Please. All you need to become fully cultivated is what the younger Golden Buffalo needed to return to his true form: a kiss from our Immortal Woman here. It's the most powerful elixir I can think of at the moment."

Rabbit stuck out her tongue. "That's kind of nasty, but whatever." The cricket flipped himself over wearily and lifted his head. "Tell me about it."

The Immortal Woman Rabbit brought the cricket champion up to her lips, closed her eyes, and kissed him.

"Ouch!" she yelped, dropping the insect. "He bit me!"

Splinter-of-Jade laughed all the way to the ground.

Snow Feathers picked up the ingot in his talons and hopped around flapping his wings awkwardly, trying to take off one-legged. Just as he finally lifted off the ground, a comet from above smashed him back into the rubble. He screamed in rage. Splinter-of-Jade came at him again like a herd of dragons, beating the bird into the air. The crane dropped its golden prize

and took off skyward, trying to get ahead of the tiny attacker. He swung and stabbed his beak at thin air. The cricket tore at his snowy feathers and kicked at his wings, throwing him off course. The ancient bird didn't notice he wasn't speeding upwards, but rather towards the dark mountain-side. He crashed into the trunk of a tree, a kick from his assailant smashing him right through it. The impossibly powerful assault didn't stop until both his iron wing-bones were smashed and his talons broken. Then the cricket went for his neck.

* * * * *

The stars were coming out over the Qiantang River, as well as they could manage through the lights of the city beyond the hill. Eight Immortals and two mortals sat in the riverside tea shop just beside the former Pagoda, an establishment that had very narrowly avoided being buried in the rubble. Royal Uncle Cao banged his wooden clappers for silence and passed the gourd of wine.

"Let's get this wrapped up quickly, us old people need to get some sleep. Where's that freak of nature now?"

Lan Caihe skipped in the door, carrying some packages under his arm. "Who wants presents?" zie sang.

Lu Dongbin took the mysterious packages ceremoniously. "Silence, everyone. On behalf of the famed Nine Immortals and all the economists of the nation, I would like to thank Ninth Goldfish, Water Agent of the North, for his aid on the Immortal Woman Rabbit's journey and valor in battle." He handed a two-meter-long pair of packages to the Agent.

Ninth Goldfish's dark blue uniform and reflective orange vest were ripped in dozens of places, and his face was sliced up something awful, but he received the gifts with all due grace. He tore off the brown paper carefully, setting it aside for proper disposal, and found inside a broom and dust-pan with long wooden handles, intricately carved with a pair of spiraling dragons. He smiled.

"Thank you. My old ones didn't fare too well in

the fight."

"Anything to keep the place clean," Dongbin laughed. "Now, as for our friend Master Ling, I think you might be interested in this." He handed the remaining square package to the old bicycle thief, but didn't let go of his end at first. "Don't open it here. In fact, don't open it ever." The thief's eyes grew wide. "This isn't what I think it is, is it?"

"That's right, the stinkiest stinky tofu the Middle Kingdom has ever known. Fermented deep beneath the swamps of Guangdong for three hundred years by the mad alchemists of the Fetid Mountains."

"Can I try some?" he asked eagerly.

"No! Never! If you were but to crack the seal, the odor inside would wipe out half of Hangzhou, including yourself."

Master Ling leaned back, cradling the precious box. "I'll treasure it always!" he declared.

"Thank you both, really," Rabbit said, a tear in her eye. "I still don't know why you two had to tag along, but you were a big help."

"So let's get going then," Zhongli Quan announced. "Penglai Mountain awaits our return, along with our two new members. I wonder how long it will take the historians and storytellers to catch on to the fact that there are nine of us now."

"I doubt they ever will," mused Splinter-of-Jade, perched on the warm teapot. "Nobody ever notices the arthropods."

"Fine, I've got the cowry. Let's see if we can get there before midnight," said Lu Dongbin.

"Wait!" Ninth Goldfish sat up. "You're taking Prince Millet's shell? Doesn't the city depend on it?"

The Immortal Dongbin shook his head. "Dear Water Agent, haven't you learned anything today? The prosperity brought by the cowry comes part and parcel with the trash you spend your days cleaning up. The elder Golden Buffalo was right about that--the "wild Earth" is not so wild as you Agents like to believe. As the city grows in wealth, it destroys itself, the lake, and the Frontier around it. Balance cannot be achieved under the sway of the cowry. Thus the dynasties of old rose and fell. Lest the Dao be disrupted, Prince Millet's relic must not stay in one place for too long. We will take care of the matter for now. There are some regions out

West that would be more than happy to host the shell for a while."

"But what are we going to do back here in Hangzhou after it's gone?"

"Things are going to get really messy before they get better. You, for one, will never be out of a job. Use your new broom well. And as for your friend, crime never goes out of business. You two and the rest of the city will just have to adapt to the changing times as mortals everywhere have always done. If you wish to do anything more, head for the mountains and start mixing up elixirs. I can give you some good recipes."

The strange little company finished their tea in silence and stood to depart, Master Ling emptying the wooden bowl of chocolates into his vest pocket surreptitiously.

"Which way to Penglai Mountain?" asked Rabbit.

"In the middle of nowhere, as the crow flies," Iron-Crutch Li answered. The others chuckled. It was obviously a very old joke.

The nine immortals mounted the clouds and flew over the river to the West, Ninth Goldfish and Master Ling looking a little crestfallen as they waved goodbye from the street outside the tea shop. Splinter-of-Jade chirped a farewell to the mountains and the city behind, following it up with an ancient fighting cricket's challenge to the moon above. A chorus of nameless crickets answered his call from the dark hills below.

